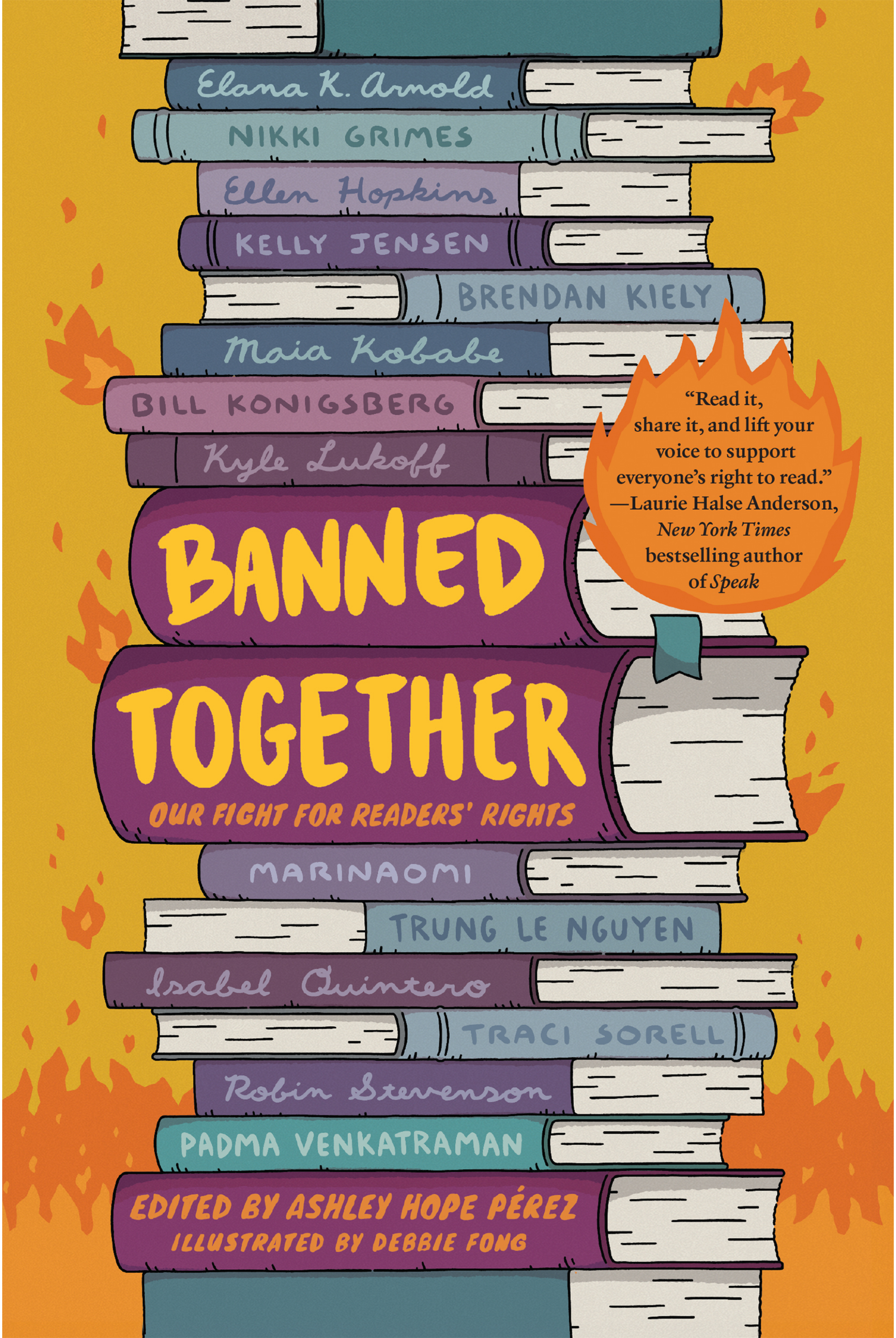


Elana K. Arnold

NIKKI GRIMES

Ellen Hopkins

KELLY JENSEN

BRENDAN KIELY

Maia Kobabe

BILL KONIGSBERG

Kyle Lukoff

BANNED TOGETHER

OUR FIGHT FOR READERS' RIGHTS

MARINAOMI

TRUNG LE NGUYEN

Isabel Quintero

TRACI SORELL

Robin Stevenson

PADMA VENKATRAMAN

EDITED BY ASHLEY HOPE PÉREZ

ILLUSTRATED BY DEBBIE FONG

"Read it,
share it, and lift your
voice to support
everyone's right to read."
—Laurie Halse Anderson,
New York Times
bestselling author
of *Speak*

PRAISE FOR
BANNED TOGETHER

“This book shines a beacon on banned books and encourages readers to discuss difficult topics, rather than pretend they don’t exist. Thank you to these incredible authors, who were brave and gracious enough to inform, to share their experiences, to let readers know they are not alone, that they are okay.”

—Lisa McMann, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Wake trilogy and *The Unwanteds*

* * *

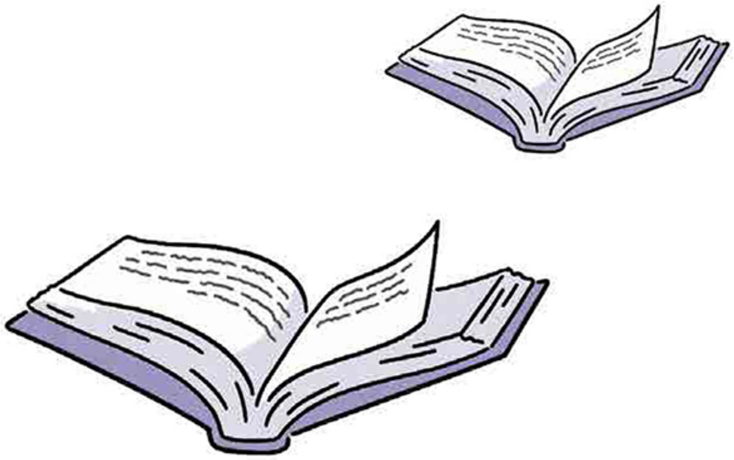
“The voices in *Banned Together* say ‘Hell no!’ to those who seek to erase them and their communities. With fear, ferocity, and love—yes, love—their words hold so much for so many.”

—Dr. Debbie Reese, award-winning coauthor of *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States for Young People*

* * *

“A beautifully inspiring reminder that unreasonably harsh censorship by extremists harms children and threatens our constitutional rights.”

—Margarita Engle, Newbery Honor–winning author of *The Surrender Tree* and Young People’s Poet Laureate Emeritus



"Some of the most important voices of our day are being silenced across America, but they're proudly and vividly on display in this outstanding anthology full of knowledge, insight, and heart. Stories save lives, and one of the stories in this book could save yours."

—Ryan Estrada, Freeman Award–winning author of *Banned Book Club* and *No Rules Tonight*

* * *

"In our fight against book bans, here is my weapon of choice! This brilliant and powerful book provides hope and a rallying cry that empowers all readers to defend our right to read!"

—Ellen Oh, award-winning author and founder of We Need Diverse Books

* * *

"*Banned Together* is a mighty resource, one that will, with any luck, act as not only a text of defiance, but also a text of massive inspiration. A heart-lifting body of work that will echo for generations."

—Hanif Abdurraqib, Carnegie Medalist and MacArthur Fellow

* * *

“What’s it like to be the author of a banned book? How does it feel to be accused of grooming and sexualizing children by strangers? This anthology gives voice to writers whose work and identities have been demonized and, in the process, makes an impassioned plea for allowing young people to read books that reflect the full range of human experience.”

—Mike Hixenbaugh, author of *They Came for the Schools: One Town’s Fight Over Race and Identity, and the New War for America’s Classrooms*

BANNED TOGETHER

OUR FIGHT FOR READERS' RIGHTS

EDITED BY ASHLEY HOPE PÉREZ

ILLUSTRATED BY DEBBIE FONG

HOLIDAY HOUSE NEW YORK

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Printed and bound in November 2024 at Toppan Leefung, DongGuan, China.
This book was printed on FSC®–certified text paper.
The artwork was created digitally with Clip Studio Paint.
www.holidayhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 9780823458301
Ebook ISBN 9780823462032

EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

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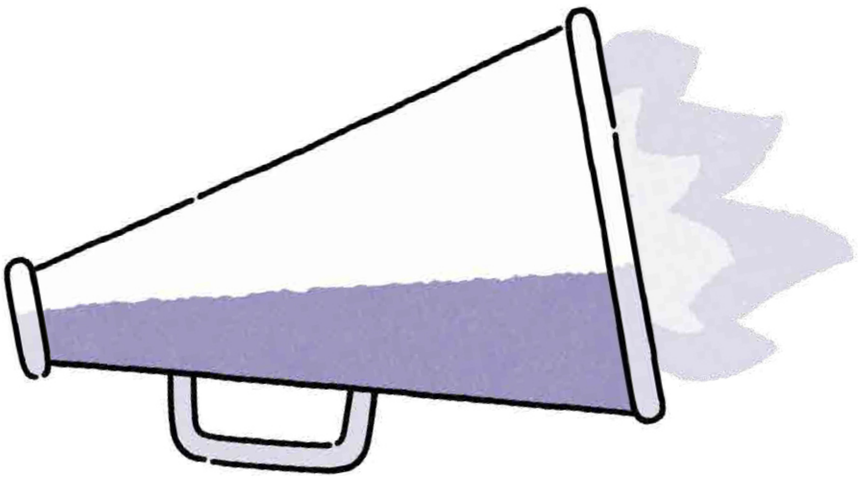
Back Matter



For the students at César E. Chávez High School, who told me about the books they wanted to read and challenged me to write them; for Liam and Ethan, who know they are free to read any book they are willing to talk about; and for brave readers everywhere who persist when cowards try to erase stories and communities from libraries.

You all are my reason for writing.
You all are my reason for fighting.

CAUTION
CAUTION

Hey reader,

I am so excited you are holding this book! I have been dreaming of an anthology like this since 2021, when my novel *Out of Darkness* became one of the most banned books in the US. It has been removed again and again from school libraries like yours, targeted by misguided adults who rarely bother to read the books they criticize. Book banners went hard after *Out of Darkness,* but they have also targeted many others. Thousands of books. Books carefully selected by trained librarians. Books that readers like you have a right to access.

I have watched, often feeling helpless, as hundreds of books disappeared from libraries like the one in the Texas high school where I used to teach. I took my students to the library each week, and the conversations we had inspired me to become the writer I am. I have shed a lot of tears, thinking of the books that today's teens will never find.

But I haven't just been crying. I've also been doing everything I can to find creative ways to connect with teen readers and to make sure they know about the books that are being erased from libraries across the country.

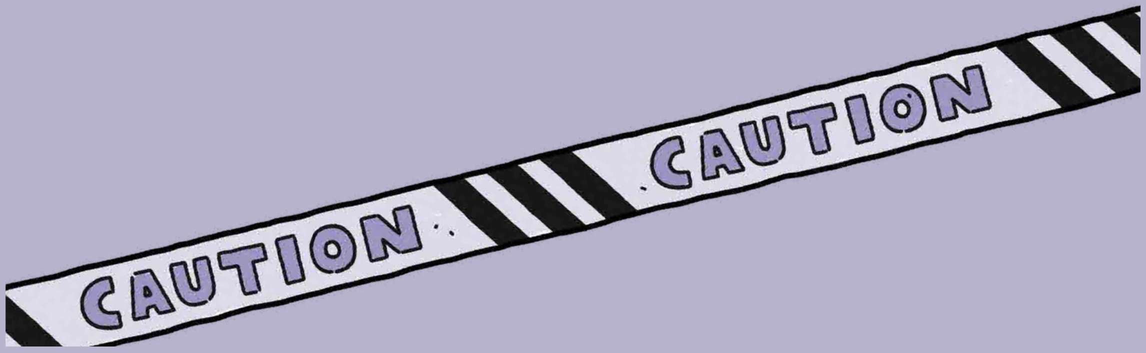
All of the amazing authors in this anthology write so that teens will find the stories and ideas that matter to them. We write because we care about you, your understanding of yourself and the people around you, your vision of the world, your ability to build a future that's better than our past or present.

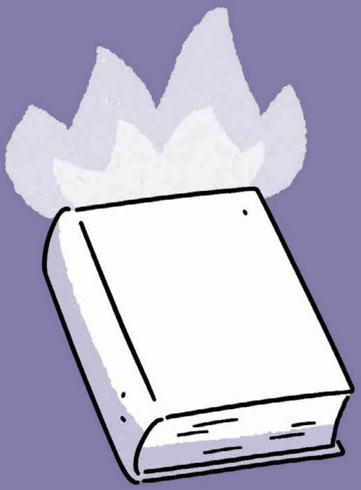
Book banners want to get between readers and the powerful work of these authors. This collection says NO WAY. We're bringing those writers' voices back to readers. Our goal with *Banned Together* is to talk about *what* is happening to books in libraries, *why* these vanishing stories matter, and *how* you can empower yourself and others to resist.

We hope this collection is just one stop in your brave and bold reading journey. Look us up! We'd love to hear from you.

XOXO,
Ashley Hope Pérez

PS: In addition to our brilliant contributors' pieces, I've done my best to fill this anthology with lists of books, ideas for taking action against bans, and more. I hope you find something that gets you fired up about what's between the covers of the books some people want to take away.

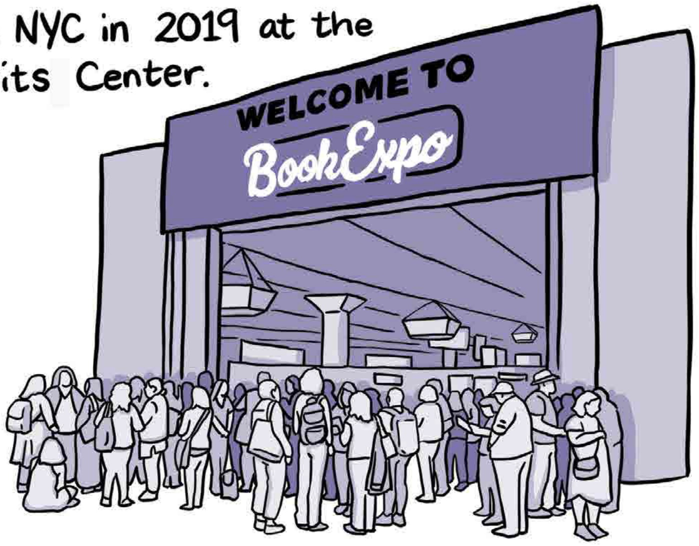




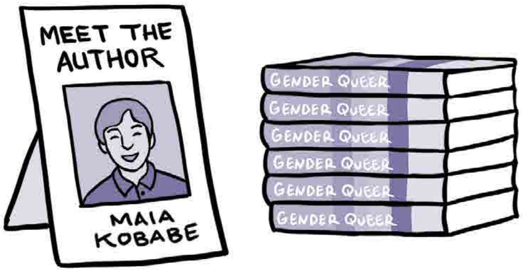
MAIA KOBABE

Maia Kobabe is a nonbinary/queer/trans author and illustrator, a voracious reader, a K-pop fan, and a daydreamer. You can learn an astonishing number of intimate details about em in *Gender Queer: A Memoir* and in eir other short comics, published by *The New Yorker, The Nib,* and the *Washington Post* and in many print anthologies. *Gender Queer* won a Stonewall Honor and an Alex Award from the American Library Association in 2020. It was also the most challenged book in the United States in 2021 and 2022. Eir next books include *Breathe: Journeys to Healthy Binding* with Dr. Sarah Peitzmeier and *Saachi's Stories* with Lucky Srikumar.

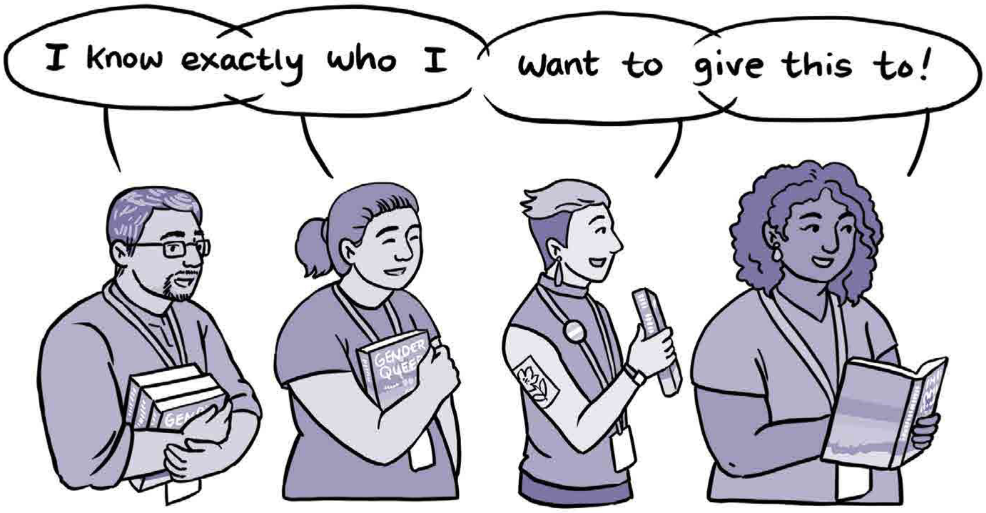
The first event I went to with GENDER QUEER was in NYC in 2019 at the Javits Center.

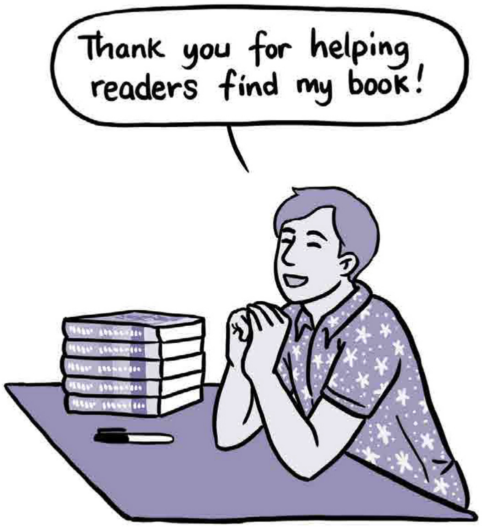

WELCOME TO
BookExpo

So many of the people who came to my signing were librarians

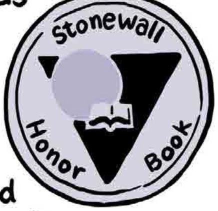

MEET THE AUTHOR
MAIA KOBABE
GENDER QUEER
GENDER QUEER
GENDER QUEER
GENDER QUEER
GENDER QUEER
GENDER QUEER

and so many of them said the same thing:


I know exactly who I
want to give this to!
GENDER QUEER


Thank you for helping readers find my book!

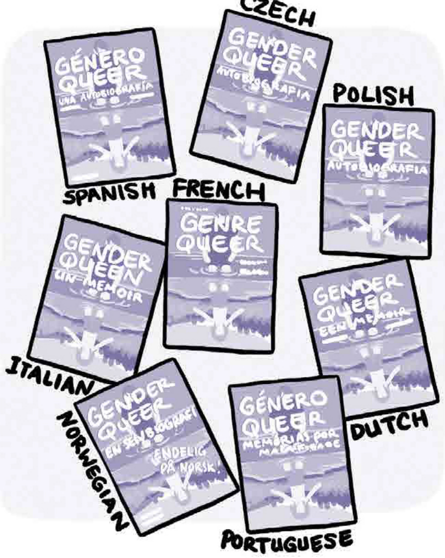
While working on the book, I was genuinely unsure if anyone outside of my family & close friends would read it.


Stonewall
Honor Book

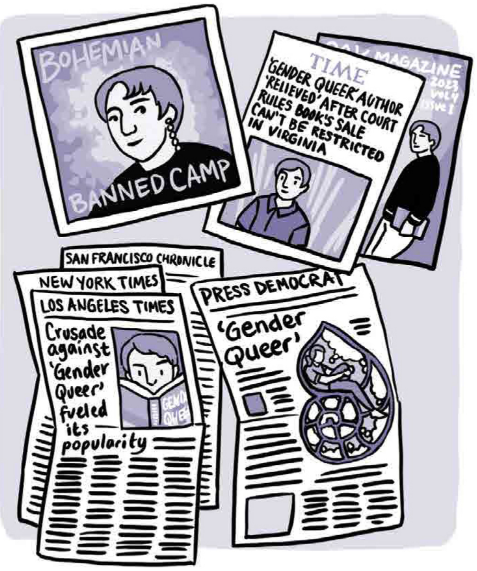
But the early support of librarians and two American Library Association Awards helped sell three print runs in the first year.

ALEX
award
WINNER
Teen Readers and Adult Books

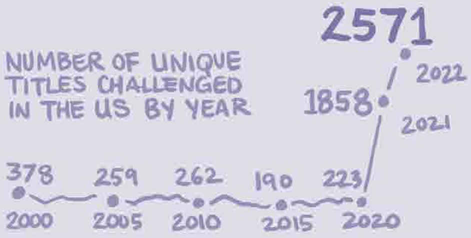
Since then, GENDER QUEER has been published in 8 languages with more on the way.


CZECH
POLISH
SPANISH
FRENCH
ITALIAN
NORWEGIAN
DUTCH
PORTUGUESE
GÉNERO QUEER
UNA AUTOBIOGRAFÍA
GENDER QUEER
AUTOBIOGRAFIA
GENDER QUEER
AUTOBIOGRAFIA
GENRE QUEER
GENDER QUEER
UN MEMOIR
GENDER QUEER
EEN MEMOIR
GENDER QUEER
EN SELVBIOGRAFI
ENDELIG PÅ NORSK!
GÉNERO QUEER
MEMÓRIAS

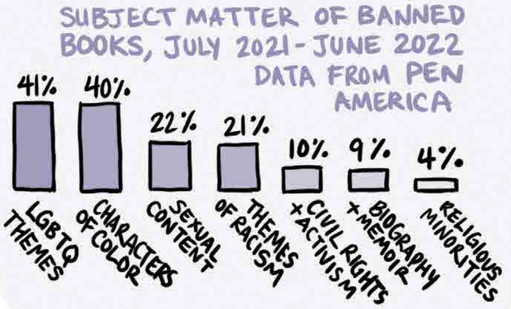
It has also been the most banned book in the US for the past two years.


BOHEMIAN
BANNED CAMP
TIME
'GENDER QUEER' AUTHOR 'RELIEVED' AFTER COURT RULES BOOK'S SALE CAN'T BE RESTRICTED IN VIRGINIA
MAGAZINE
2023
VOL 4
ISSUE 1
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
NEW YORK TIMES
LOS ANGELES TIMES
Crusade against 'Gender Queer' fueled its popularity
PRESS DEMOCRAT
'Gender Queer'

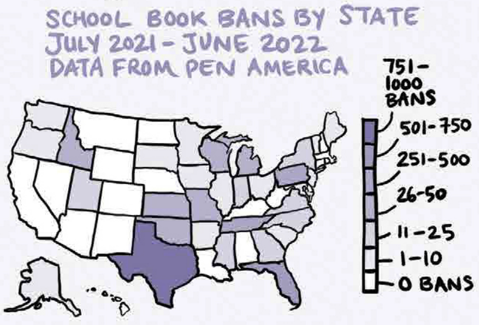
The American Library Association has tracked an astronomical increase in book challenges over the past few years.



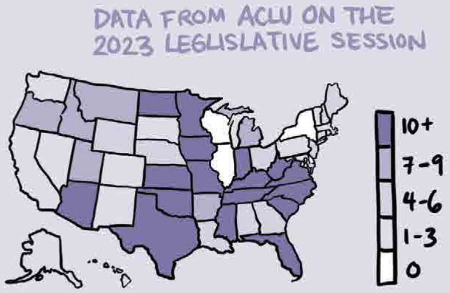
Most of these challenges are to books with diverse characters and LGBTQ themes.



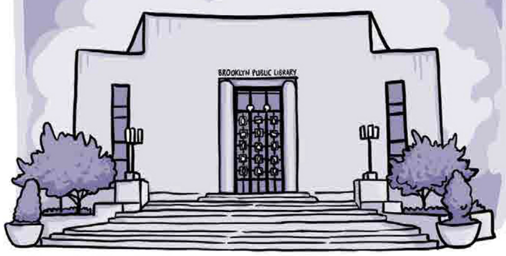
These challenges are coming unevenly across the US.


SCHOOL BOOK BANS BY STATE
JULY 2021 - JUNE 2022
DATA FROM PEN AMERICA
751-1000 BANS
501-750
251-500
26-50
11-25
1-10
0 BANS

In a pattern that mirrors the legislative attacks on LGBTQ people.

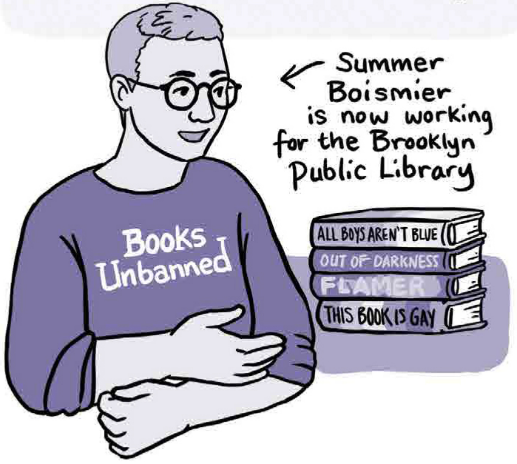

DATA FROM ACLU ON THE 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION
10+
7-9
4-6
1-3
0

The Brooklyn Public Library offered free eCards to anyone in the US aged 13 to 21, in an effort to make banned books more available to young readers.


BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

email BooksUnbanned@bklynlibrary.org to request a free eCard

A teacher in Norman, Oklahoma, gave her students the QR code for the free eCard & lost her job.

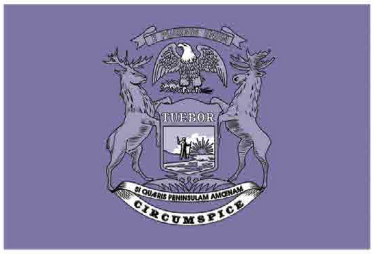

Summer Boismier is now working for the Brooklyn Public Library
Books Unbanned
ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE
OUT OF DARKNESS
FLAMER
THIS BOOK IS GAY

Hoopla & Libby/Overdrive, apps used to access digital library books, are now banned in the state of Mississippi for anyone under the age of 18.

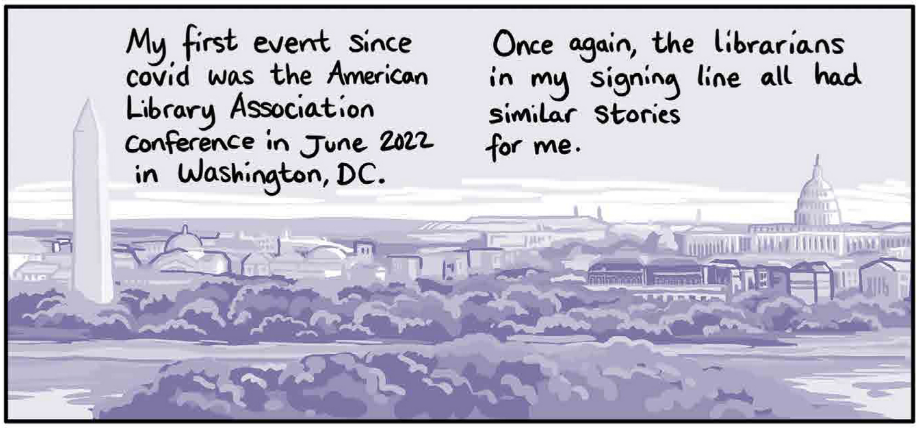
IN GOD WE TRUST

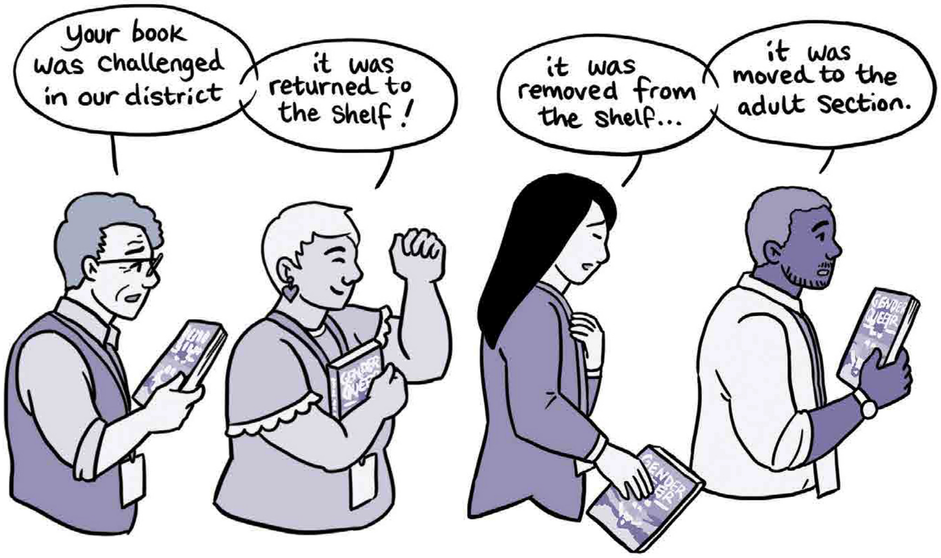
Some libraries won't allow anyone under 18 to get any library card without parental permission.

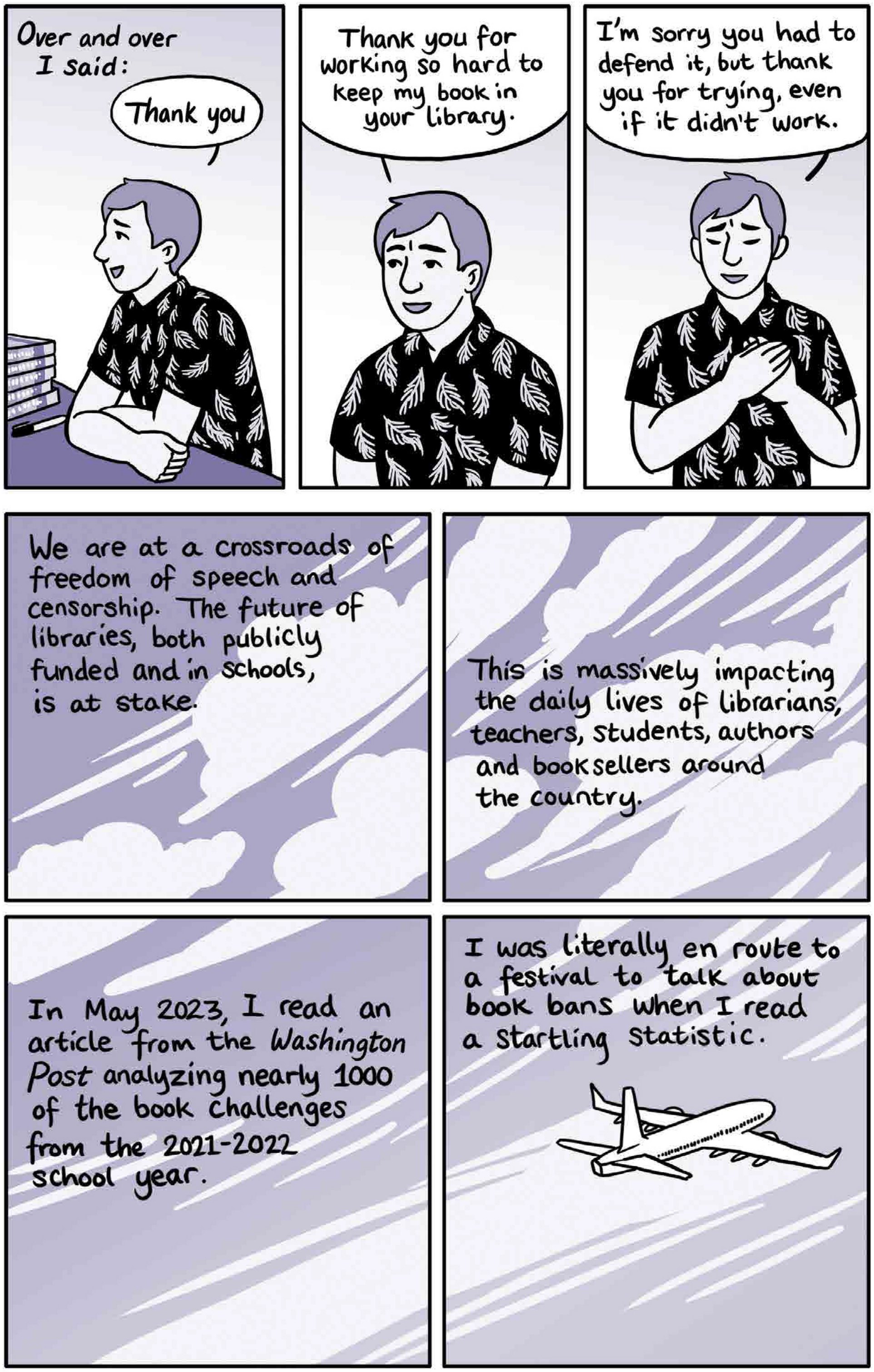
When librarians in Jamestown, Michigan, refused to remove GENDER QUEER & several other books, voters twice rejected the library's funding in 2022.


E PLURIBUS UNUM
TUEBOR
SI QUAERIS PENINSULAM AMOENAM
CIRCUMSPICE

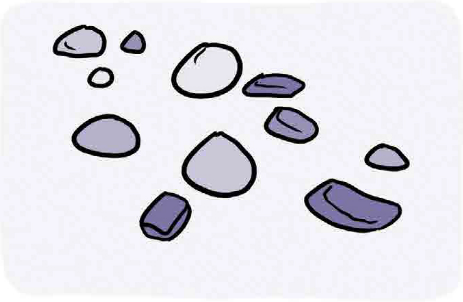
Happily, on a third vote in 2023, citizens restored the library's funding and the books stayed on the shelves.


My first event since covid was the American Library Association conference in June 2022 in Washington, DC.
Once again, the librarians in my signing line all had similar stories for me.

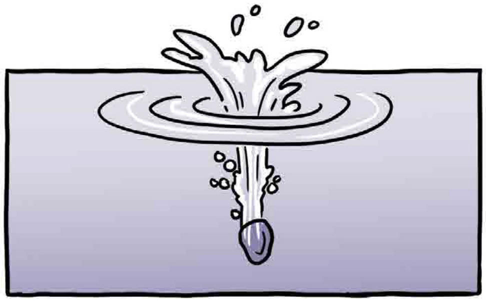

Your book was challenged in our district
it was returned to the shelf!
it was removed from the shelf...
it was moved to the adult section.
GENDER QUEER


Over and over I said:
Thank you
Thank you for working so hard to keep my book in your library.
I'm sorry you had to defend it, but thank you for trying, even if it didn't work.
We are at a crossroads of freedom of speech and censorship. The future of libraries, both publicly funded and in schools, is at stake.
This is massively impacting the daily lives of librarians, teachers, students, authors and booksellers around the country.
In May 2023, I read an article from the *Washington Post* analyzing nearly 1000 of the book challenges from the 2021-2022 school year.
I was literally en route to a festival to talk about book bans when I read a startling statistic.

60% of the 1000 book challenges were submitted by just 11 people. One man alone was responsible for 92 challenges.

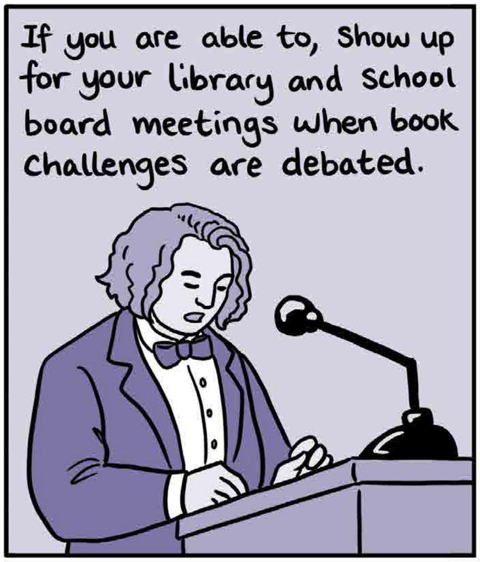


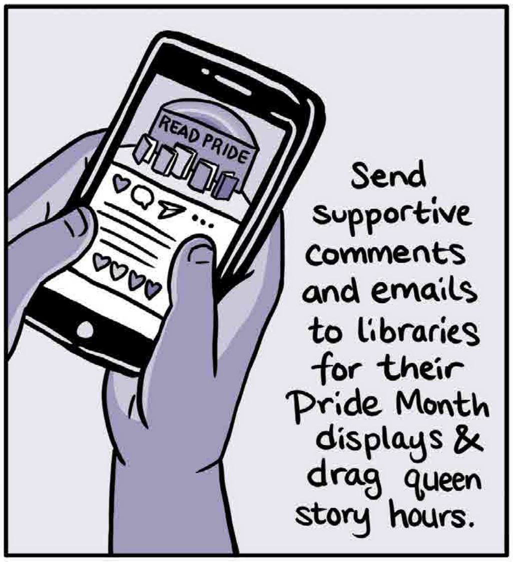
These 11 people seem to have made submitting copycat book challenges their full-time hobby. Their opinions are having an outsized ripple effect across the nation.

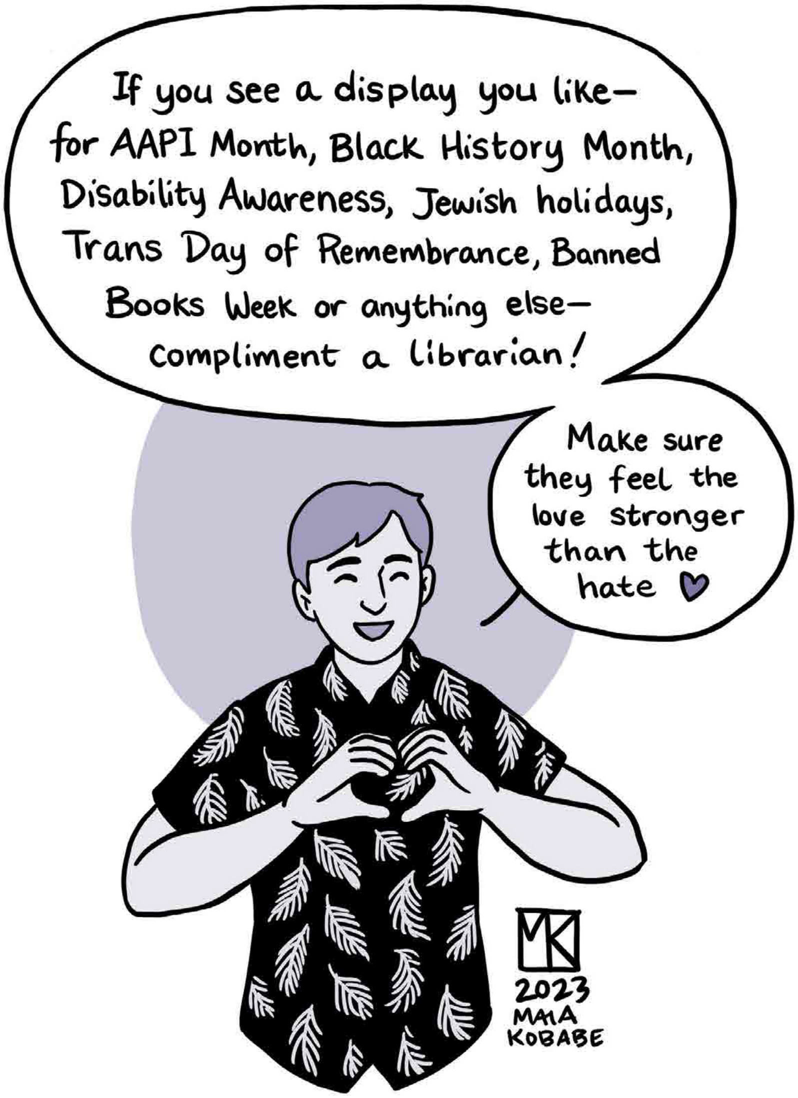


WE NEED TO MAKE THE VOICES SUPPORTING DIVERSE BOOKS & OPPOSING BOOK BANS

EVEN LOUDER.


If you are able to, show up for your library and school board meetings when book challenges are debated.


READ PRIDE
Send supportive comments and emails to libraries for their Pride Month displays & drag queen story hours.


If you see a display you like— for AAPI Month, Black History Month, Disability Awareness, Jewish holidays, Trans Day of Remembrance, Banned Books Week or anything else— compliment a librarian!
Make sure they feel the love stronger than the hate ♡
MK
2023
MAIA KOBABE

BOOK BAN FAQS

What is a book ban?

A book ban removes access to a particular book in a particular place *because someone objects to its content, ideas, or themes.* Sometimes people who seek to remove a book claim that they aren't "banning" it, since the title they want to remove can still be found somewhere else or purchased online. That's false!

Let's say you used to be able to check out *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely in your school library, but when you search the catalog today, it's missing. You ask the librarian, and he explains that the school board removed the book after a parent complained that it was antipolice. *All American Boys* has been banned from your school library. If you're lucky, you can ride the bus to your public library and still check it out—if book banners haven't removed it there too. But it *is* banned from the place where you and other students would have found it before, and that's a problem.

Okay, what about a book challenge?

A book challenge is an *attempt* to remove or restrict access to a specific book. It is the first step toward a ban. In most places, books are supposed to be available to readers while a challenge is being evaluated. In reality, many schools in the past few years have begun to remove access after a challenge—even if the challenger clearly has not read the book, or is challenging hundreds of books at once. So even challenges that don't ultimately result in a formal ban can restrict access.

How bad is it?

Book banning increased more than 1,500 percent between 2021 and 2023.

- From July 2021 to June 2023, PEN America documented a total of 5,894 book bans across 41 states and 247 public school districts. These book bans restricted access to the work of 2,598 authors, illustrators, and translators.
- By comparison, in 2020, the American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom recorded only 156 total *challenges* to books across the entire country.
- These numbers are scary. In 2021–2022, there were more than **15 times more** *bans* than all the challenges counted in 2020. And bans in 2022–2023? There were 20 times more than the baseline of challenges in 2020. That's a lot of missing books.

Note: Until 2021, only challenges were tracked, and not all challenges resulted in bans. So the increase in book banning is even more dramatic than these numbers indicate.

Is it getting worse?

Yeah, it is. The most recent data available shows that there were over 4,000 bans between July 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023. That means that in six months, more books were banned than during the entire previous year.

Several states have passed laws making bans more likely and more restrictive. For example, a new law in Utah requires *all* school districts in the state to remove a book once it has been banned in three districts.

Cutting budgets, removing librarian positions, and taking over school library spaces for other purposes (like in-school suspension in Houston, Texas) is another way that readers lose access to books they need. And this is most serious for schools where resources are already limited. We have to keep fighting for well-staffed, well-resourced, and diverse libraries in schools and communities.

How are recent bans different from those in the past?

Before 2021, most book challenges were limited to a specific school district or community, and they usually focused on a handful of books. They were often initiated by a high school parent who was "shocked" to learn what "books these days" are like. Often, a follow-up conversation with a librarian or school leader helped the parent to better understand the role and merits of the challenged book. If that failed, the parent could request that their child be prohibited from checking it out of the library. In some cases, the parent would go forward with an official challenge, and a committee would review the book and decide whether it should stay in the library or be removed.

Since 2021, things have changed. What's happening at the local level now follows a national template set by right-wing groups who create "bad book" lists. Local chapters of these groups then challenge books—often by the dozens or even the hundreds. In some places, libraries have even shut down for weeks or months while librarians are forced to remove books that have been challenged—or that *might* be challenged.

Where are book bans happening?

Book bans affect school libraries, public libraries, and even bookstores. But the most common target is the high school library. Why? Because high schools serve young *adults,* so this is the school library where materials for more mature readers rightfully belong. Reading is part of building a framework for adulthood. (After all, you don’t turn eighteen and magically know how to handle tricky situations or what to do with the harmful histories in our country.) Books selected by librarians provide appropriate resources for gaining knowledge and perspective about bodies, sex, gender identity, and sexuality. They also address important topics like racism, police brutality, and segregation. Some kids are lucky to have lots of opportunities to talk about these things with supportive adults. For many, though, books provide information and support that are otherwise missing.

Who is affected?

Authors who are female, people of color, and/or LGBTQ+ individuals are most likely to have their books targeted.

Teens who share these identities are most likely to experience increased hostility in their environment when books about or by people like them are targeted. Books that may have helped them feel a greater sense of belonging are going missing and, even worse, people in their community are calling them “filth.”

But book bans hurt everyone. No matter what your identity, it feels terrible to watch the leaders of your school let a few parents set an agenda that goes against what you and your peers need and want from your library. Book banning creates a toxic climate for your teachers and librarians, and creates obstacles to their helping students.

What do book banners think teens should read?

The truth is, their focus is almost exclusively on what *shouldn’t* be allowed. Book-banning groups call anything related to bodies or sex "pornographic" or "obscene" (see this page for why this is wrong). They like to label any challenging topic "harmful" or "divisive."

Book banners often don't read the books they challenge—in fact, they don't seem to read much at all. Sadly, their actions suggest that they don't value reading or literacy in the first place. If they did, they could accomplish something positive by promoting the books they want to see in libraries, creating parent-teen book clubs, or doing *anything* else.

Instead, these misguided adults are willing to sacrifice young people's ability to connect with books in the name of "protecting" them from stories and ideas these adults don't agree with. They're obsessed with removal, subtraction, and erasure. They suck information, diversity, and imagination from libraries, leaving behind emptiness and ignorance.

Is there any good news about books and libraries?

People all over the country are working to restore and protect access to books, through lawsuits, elections, and local organizing. Although there are many laws making it harder for readers to get books, several states have passed laws to protect libraries from attempts to remove materials, including Illinois, California, Minnesota, Maryland, Colorado, and Oregon.

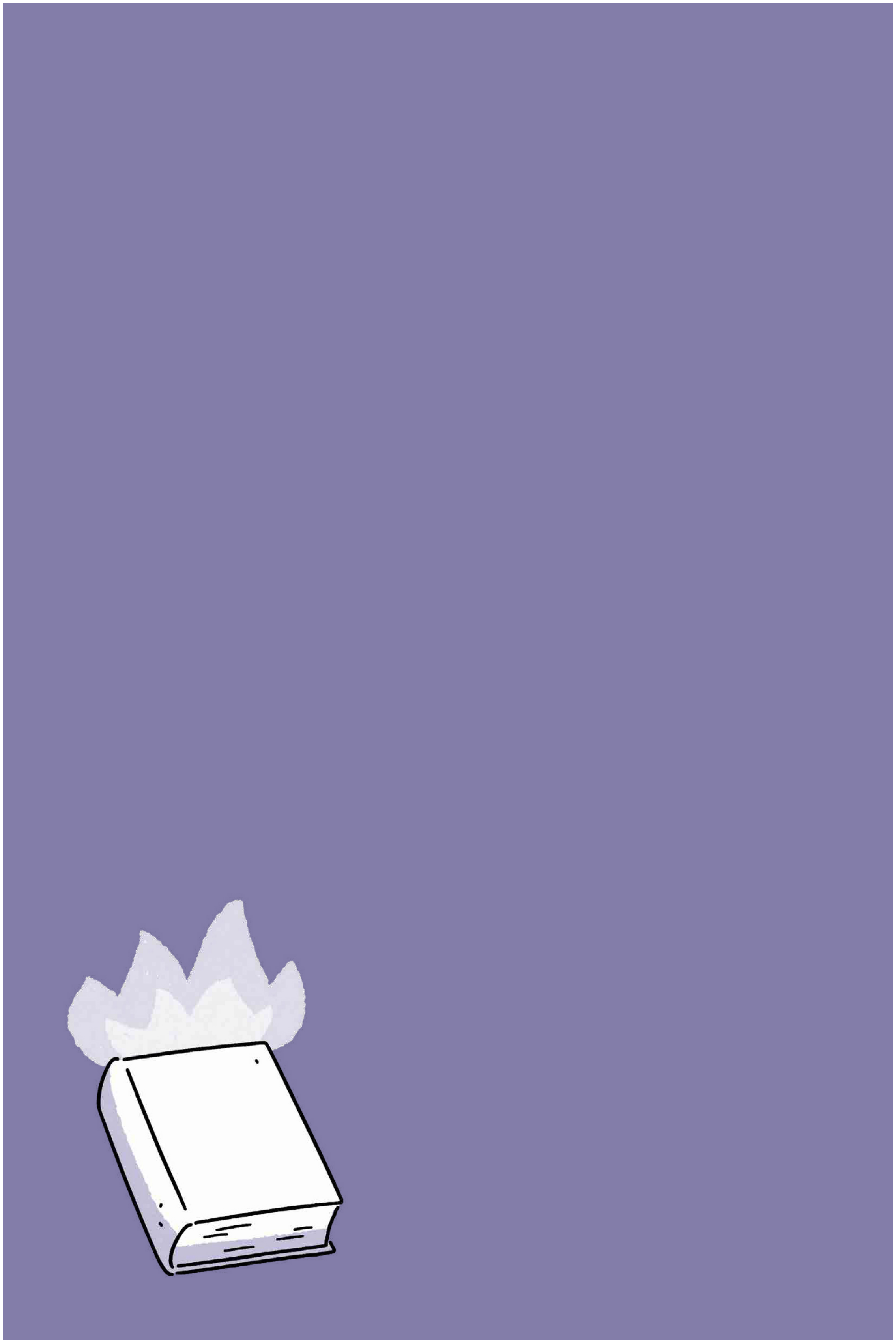
What can I do to fight book bans?

This book has ideas for steps you can take to defend the right to read. We hope you'll be inspired to take action, whether it's forming a book club, speaking up in a school board meeting, creating a Little Free Library, or requesting the books you want to see in your library. Above all, *read* banned books and talk to other people about them. Reading banned books rejects censorship in the most direct way possible.

A TEEN TO-DO LIST: FIGHT BOOK BANS

- ✓ Check out and read BIPOC/LGBTQ+ books.
- ✓ Request books at your school/library.
- ✓ Attend school board meetings and sign up to talk about why books matter.
- ✓ Use social media to talk about book bans (and connect with other teens who want to do something!).
- ✓ Know the statistics and why they matter.
- ✓ Use facts to shut down hate speech and misinformation.
- ✓ Vote (if you can) and encourage others to do so—especially in local school board elections.
- ✓ Write letters to your school board, superintendent, or elected officials to advocate for books you love.

Tips adapted from Kelly Jensen, writing for Bookriot.com



ROBIN STEVENSON

Robin Stevenson is the award-winning author of more than thirty books, ranging from picture books like *Pride Puppy* to teen novels like *When You Get the Chance.* She also writes nonfiction about topics such as queer history, activism, and abortion rights—her most recent title is *Queer History A–Z: A Hundred Years of LGBTQ+ Activism.* Before turning to writing full-time, Robin was a clinical social worker and counselor. She was born in England and lives on the west coast of Canada.

WINGS OF PAGES AND WORDS

BY ROBIN STEVENSON

1.

Five years ago, I was in a public library, speaking to kids about a book I had written exploring queer history and community. *Pride* was a finalist for an award in a school-based reading program, and I'd been invited to talk about it—but apparently one of the teachers who had brought his students to listen had expected me to talk about my novels instead. He got to his feet, held up his hand, and said, "I'm going to stop you right there." And then—in front of fifty or so sixth graders who were sitting in rows on the carpet between us—he insisted that I stop talking about the subject. It wasn't appropriate for the students, he said.

I tried to respond as well as I could. I managed to say that the content was not only appropriate but important—young people should learn about history, should understand queer people's struggle for acceptance and equal rights, and should be aware of the diversity of the world we live in. I pointed out that many students have LGBTQ+ people in their families, or are LGBTQ+ themselves, and that it is important that they hear LGBTQ+ issues discussed openly. I told him that the message he was sending students was harmful and shaming. Still, with my heart racing, my body in an instant cold sweat, and my voice shaking, I wasn't as articulate as I would've liked to be.

In that moment, I was completely shocked—but I shouldn't have been. Book challenges aren't just about books—in fact, many of the people challenging books haven't even read them. Like this teacher, they object to the identities the books include and represent. Banning queer books and censoring queer authors are just the latest tactics in a decades-old project: accusing queer people of being a danger to children.

2.

In 1977, Anita Bryant—an American singer and beauty pageant queen best known for her Florida orange juice commercials—started a "Save Our Children" campaign to convince Americans that gay men and lesbians were a threat to young people. She called homosexuality evil and deviant. She insisted that queer people didn't deserve rights and compared them to murderers: If we give gay people civil rights, she argued, what's to stop murderers from demanding "murderer rights"? Or a rebellious young person from insisting on "rebellious-child rights"? (I'm not sure which possibility alarmed her more.)

There's a direct line from Anita's Save Our Children campaign to Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law today. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Anita claimed that queer people were grooming and abusing children in America's schools, and—much like leaders of today's antiqueer book-banning group Moms for Liberty—she continually brought up her status as a Christian mother, weaponizing this against the queer community. "As a mother," she said, "I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children."

Suggesting that children—particularly white children—are in danger is a disturbingly common, and powerful, strategy that had an established track record when Anita adopted it: it had been used to rally white conservatives over the previous two decades in opposition to the racial desegregation of schools. (Unsurprisingly, this—along with the realities of enslavement and other historical harms—is part of our history that book banners want to prevent teenagers from learning about.)

On October 14, 1977, at a press conference where Anita Bryant was ranting about gay people flaunting their sexuality, a young gay rights activist named Thom Higgins threw a pie in her face (you can, if you like, watch this historic moment on YouTube). He wasn't the only one who didn't like her message. Her hate spurred protests and galvanized gay rights activism across America. And it seems that it poisoned her life as well: within a couple of years, she got divorced, was fired from her position as an orange juice spokesperson, and filed for bankruptcy.

Fun fact: In 2021, Anita Bryant's granddaughter announced her engagement to another woman (she was undecided, she said, about whether to invite her still-homophobic grandmother to the wedding). Despite the haters, queer people keep on existing and finding joy.

3.

In 2023, a group in Front Royal, Virginia, threw a book-banning party: a BBQ, complete with beer, babysitting, and prizes for those who could fill out the most "Request for Reconsideration" forms to challenge library books they had not read. After the BBQ, with over 500 forms in hand, the group demanded that their town's public library remove 134 children's books on the grounds that they were obscene and pornographic. (Apparently some people felt mere removal didn't go far enough: "Burn this book!" one wrote, referring to Malinda Lo's National Book Award–winning historical novel, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*.)

Among the books challenged in Front Royal was my board book *Pride Colors:* a rhyming book for babies and toddlers that follows the colors of the Pride flag. ("A bright red heart, a little star, I love you just the way you are," it begins.) One BBQ attendee described this book as "sexually explicit," while another called it "grooming" and said it was "inappropriate for all children."

When the librarians didn't immediately cave to their demands, the book banners attacked the library itself, demanding that the county defund the library if their list of books remained on shelves. The county board of supervisors—at least one of whom had attended the BBQ and filled in book challenge forms himself—voted to withhold 75 percent of the library's funding, putting it at risk of closure. After months of intense criticism and personal attacks, the library's director resigned.

Through it all, hundreds of people in the community came together to fight to save their library. They attended meetings, enduring hours of homophobic and transphobic statements from people who argued that their status as Christians and as parents gave them the right to withhold resources from tens of thousands of other people. After sitting through these dehumanizing and hateful claims, the library's supporters spoke up about the importance of diverse and inclusive books, about opposing censorship and defending the freedom to read, and about the critical role a library plays in a diverse community. They made websites, started petitions, lobbied politicians, and talked to the media. "We, the community, see this for what it is, and we won't allow our library to be used as a political wedge to win over religious voters at the expense of our LGBTQ+ community," they wrote. Ultimately, these library defenders managed to save the public library in Front Royal—and, so far, to keep queer books on the shelves—but threats to defund or shut down public libraries are on the rise and similar stories are unfolding across the United States.

Much of this current wave of antiqueer—and particularly antitrans—backlash has been organized under the banner of "parental rights"—that is, the alleged rights of conservative and religious parents to control what children see and hear, and to restrict what they read and learn. "Parental rights" is a misleading phrase that ignores the rights of a much larger group of parents: those who want their kids to attend LGBTQ+-inclusive schools; those who think public libraries should meet the needs of the diverse communities they serve; those who support teens having access to information about their bodies, rights, and choices; those who trust young people to choose their own books, to think critically, and to make their own decisions about what they believe. It also ignores the needs of children themselves. Regardless of their age, children are not property: they are people, and they have rights of their own.

But it’s also worth noting that while much of the rhetoric about book banning stresses the need to protect *children,* most of the books being pulled from shelves are in high school libraries—spaces that serve people who are soon to be adults. This is a deliberate blurring of the lines between a fabricated image of very young children being forced to read inappropriately mature books and the reality of teen readers seeking out the books they want, reading stories and absorbing knowledge as they work to understand a complex, imperfect world. Book banners need this deception. After all, it is hard to argue convincingly that people who have jobs and drive cars are incapable of selecting their own library books. It is harder still to justify withholding information about sexual health from people who may already have sexual partners and who could become—or indeed, may already be—parents themselves.

4.

Abortion is an essential part of health care—a necessary medical procedure and one that is part of many people’s lives. But there is *still* so much stigma attached to it. I wrote my YA book *My Body My Choice: The Fight for Abortion Rights* because I wanted to start conversations about abortion and abortion rights. I also wrote this book because Trump had been elected president, and I was worried about the future of reproductive rights. (In the wake of the Supreme Court’s dismantling of abortion protections enshrined by *Roe v. Wade,* it turns out I was right to worry. But I have never wanted so badly to be wrong.)

I loved writing *My Body My Choice.* Despite the escalating attacks on abortion rights, my research filled me with hope—because the community of people standing up for choice is dedicated, passionate, and determined. They are focused on the realities of people’s lives, and deeply aware of the complicated contexts within which people make choices—including the choice to end a pregnancy, or the choice to become a parent. I have such deep respect for these activists, and I was excited to share their stories with readers. I hoped that teens reading this book would feel more informed and empowered to make their own choices about their lives and bodies, and perhaps also inspired to speak up for reproductive rights and freedom. I hoped the book would help them realize that they could make a difference.

I am not sure how many teenagers the book has reached, though. It got starred reviews, won awards, and made "best books" lists, but I have never spoken to an audience of teens about this book. I wrote *My Body My Choice* to start conversations, to break silences, to challenge stigma, but it has felt like the silence and stigma that surround abortion engulfed my book as well.

While there have been official challenges to *My Body My Choice,* I suspect that it has been far more impacted by librarians deciding not to purchase it in the first place to avoid possible backlash. Soft censorship, quiet censorship, shadow banning: these are some of the names for the part of the book-banning iceberg that lies beneath the surface. Of course, no librarian is required to buy a particular book, let alone invite an author to speak about it. And it's not hard to understand why those working in schools might avoid tough topics out of an instinct for self-preservation, especially in the current climate. The people who are trying to ban books are loud and can be vicious. Librarians have been fired and harassed. They receive death threats. Libraries have had their funding withheld and been threatened with closure.

I don't blame any individual librarian for trying to stay safe and keep their job. I know what the pressure feels like. I've done school visits where I'm so intensely uncomfortable that I've failed to come out as queer myself, unable to force myself to say the words even though I know how much this matters to the queer teens in the room.

In the last few years, I have felt the pressure to self-censor mounting. I am aware of it when I think about what book to write next, when I craft a scene in a YA novel, when I select historical figures and facts to include in my nonfiction work. Thoughts of potential backlash cling to the edges of these decisions, tugging them away from my real focus: what teens need, what makes a good story, what is true.

When authors and librarians are thinking about possible backlash rather than thinking about what books teens need, we are doing the work of book banners for them.

This is not a side effect of book bans: it is a central goal.

5.

One silver lining of my books being challenged has been the people I have met. Teachers, librarians, advocates, and parents from cities and small towns all over the United States and Canada continue fighting to keep libraries open and diverse books on the shelves. These dedicated adults inspire me. But most of all, I have loved hearing from young people.

Most of the books being targeted and censored are books written for teens, and thankfully, high school students are organizing to protect their right to read. In cities and towns across North America, young people have written letters, spoken at school board meetings, made T-shirts, fundraised, formed book clubs, created networks for sharing banned books, launched websites and petitions, and organized walkouts.

I recently met with a group of high school students to listen to their thoughts about book banning.

We talked about how the teen years are a time for developing the skills to reflect, to be introspective, to think critically. During that time, the teens said, you are forming your own values and beliefs, inventing yourself, shaping who you will be as an adult. Censorship undermines that important work by limiting the information teens can access, restricting their freedom to read and learn and seek information. By doing this, it also chips away at the rights of teenagers to make the choices that are best for them. One seventeen-year-old pointed out that using the language of “parental rights” to justify book bans shows a deeply upsetting disregard for the autonomy and agency of young people.

These students also spoke about the importance of representation, of the significance of seeing people like yourself in the books you read, and of the harm done by efforts to ban books because of the identities of the characters they include. These may be the very books that can help a reader feel less alone, giving them language and context to make sense of their own lives and identities. One student noted that never seeing yourself on the page could make you feel like you were weird or strange. Another pointed out the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric of book banners, and added that being taught to hate yourself posed a danger far greater than any book ever could.

Reading—whether about fictional characters or history—allows teens to grapple with complexity, build more nuanced understandings of issues and events, and develop empathy for others. Books can present readers with all kinds of experiences, ideas, and possibilities—and they provide a safe and valuable way to explore. Novels about challenging, even distressing, topics are often among the books being banned, but the teens I talked to argued that these books may play a particularly important role. One thirteen-year-old stated that the challenges of being a teen can feel like being thrown off a cliff, but that realistic books offer "wings of pages and words."

Reflection, critical thinking, choice, autonomy, complexity, nuance, empathy. Those who want to take books away from teens could learn a lot from listening to them instead.

LIBRARY REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION OF MATERIAL

High School Library, Anytown, Anywhere Name: Robin Stevenson

What are the title and author of the book you are commenting on?

MY BODY MY CHOICE: The Fight for Abortion Rights

Have you read this entire book?

I *wrote* this entire book.

What concerns you about the book?

I am concerned about its absence from the shelves of school libraries. I wrote it for teens, because I thought they should have access to information about abortion, about their bodies and choices, about reproductive health and rights around the world. I understand that parents may complain. I know some of the awful, hateful, even violent things they say, because they send me those emails too. But with their rights to make choices about their bodies and their lives under attack, teens need books like this more than ever. I hope you will consider making them available.

Are there other books you would suggest related to this topic?

***Comics for Choice*, edited by Hazel Newlevant, Whit Taylor, and ØK. Fox.** This is the kind of book that you end up buying over and over, because you want to read it more than once but you keep giving your copies away. It's an anthology of comics about abortion, and it's poignant, enraging, heartbreaking, funny, and packed with information.

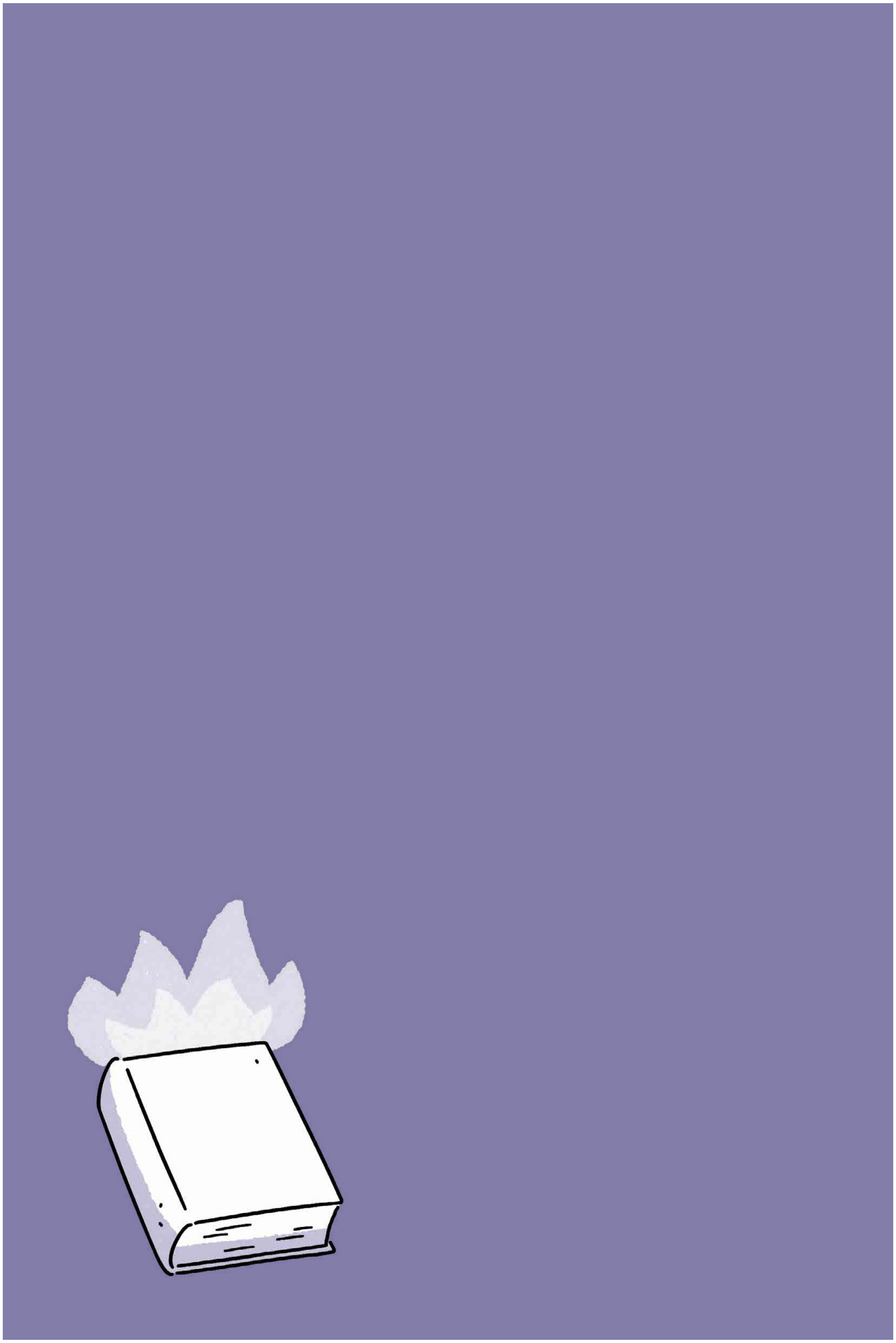
***Not Funny Ha-Ha: A Handbook for Something Hard*, by Leah Hayes.** Sometimes, in all the discussions about reproductive rights, one key question gets overlooked: What is it like to get an abortion? This graphic novel follows two women through the process of ending a pregnancy. Hayes writes that she hoped to create a book that might make the experience less lonely—and she succeeds beautifully. This one is not aimed at teens, but they should read it anyway.

***Girls Like Us*, by Randi Pink.** This young adult novel is set in 1972 and tells the stories of four teens dealing with unwanted pregnancies. Through their interwoven stories, Pink vividly re-creates a time when young people had little access to information, and when far fewer options existed. With some folks determined to take us right back to that time, this book is a good reminder of the importance of fighting for your rights to education, knowledge, and choice.

***Unpregnant*, by Jenni Hendricks and Ted Caplan.** A contemporary young adult novel about a high school senior who discovers that she is pregnant and wants an abortion. The problem is, Veronica is seventeen—and with laws restricting access to abortion services for teens, she'll have to travel over nine hundred miles to get one. Undeterred, she and her former best friend head off on a road trip filled with misadventures. A very funny and sweet story that also touches on a lot of really important issues.

***Jane Against the World,* by Karen Blumenthal.** A meticulously researched and gripping overview of abortion rights in America. Bringing history to life, Blumenthal introduces the key figures and events that led up to the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. She explores the complexities of that ruling—and the backlash and erosion of abortion rights in the years since.

***The New Handbook for a Post-Roe America: The Complete Guide to Abortion Legality, Access, and Practical Support,* by Robin Marty.** When the first edition of this book was published in 2019, some reviewers said it was alarmist to suggest that *Roe v. Wade* would fall. Clearly, it was not. This book offers advice to those wanting to organize in support of abortion access in difficult times and provides guidance to people facing unwanted pregnancies. Accessible, clear, and full of good resources.



NIKKI GRIMES

Bestselling author Nikki Grimes has received the Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement, the ALAN Award for teen literature, the Children’s Literature Legacy Award, the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry, and the Coretta Scott King Award. *Ordinary Hazards,* her banned memoir in verse, received both Michael L. Printz and Robert F. Sibert honors, among other awards.

EXTRAORDINARY HAZARDS

BY NIKKI GRIMES

I feel the prison bars close
on the poetry and prose
of my memoir, a too-true
coming-of-age drama of
shadow and light
home insecurity
innocence ravaged
and daily fights
to find safety
and harness faith
for the journey.
My weave of memories
miraculously sprinkled with
grace, love, and laughter
is a story now denied space on
bookshelves for the young.
Denied by who?
The kangaroo court of
hate-mongers masquerading
as sweet mama bears.
(Bless their little hearts.)
It is they who would dare
relegate my life's story to
a dungeon of oblivion

hastily constructed fusing
ignorance and fear of
“The Other.”
I’d scream if I had
the luxury of time, but I’m
far too busy clawing my way
up and out to make certain
my chronicle of hope
in dark and hollow places
can continue to shine a light—
especially for
those tender teens who
drunk with pain
this very moment
are staggering through
shadowy passages
of their own.

TWO Qs WITH NIKKI

Why are honest life stories—with all the pain and complexity they sometimes hold—important for teens?

More teens than we imagine are experiencing some of the very life challenges that memoirs like *Ordinary Hazards* are about, and readers need to know they are not alone. Stories that show them that others have shared the same pain and darkness and have come out on the other side, whole and healthy, are stories that inspire, encourage, and, ultimately, save lives. As for those readers who haven't borne such painful experiences themselves, these stories plant seeds of empathy and compassion—two things our world is sorely lacking, these days.

How do you find hope in the face of censorship?

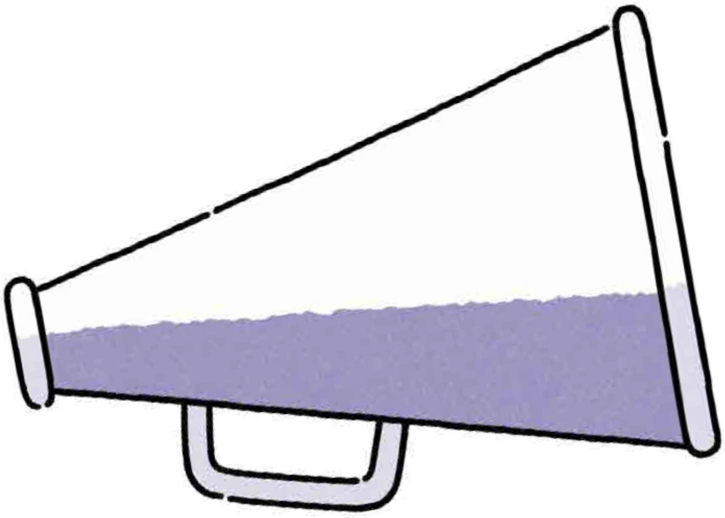
When *Ordinary Hazards* was challenged in Leander, Texas, students formed a banned book club in order to read it, along with other books removed from the school district shelves. They give me hope.

High school student Christopher Lau from Queens, New York, stood up against book banning by creating Unban Coolies, a YouTube channel that supports banned authors by interviewing them and bringing their books to the attention of a wider audience. He gives me hope.

Librarians like Amanda Jones, and organizations like PEN America, both of whom have gone on the offense by taking book banners to court to challenge the constitutionality of their efforts to silence authors and limit the rights and freedom of young readers—they give me hope.

The thousands of librarians who refuse to remove challenged books from their shelves without cause and due process, and the hundreds of teachers across the country who refuse to stop teaching and sharing important, award-winning, diverse stories in their classrooms—they give me hope.

Thank God, hope is not in short supply.



BANNED BOOKS THAT TELL UNFORGETTABLE LIFE STORIES

MEMOIR IN POETRY

***Ordinary Hazards: A Memoir,* by Nikki Grimes.** Linked poems tell of growing up with a paranoid schizophrenic mother and a mostly absent father. Grimes turned to words, and writing, for shelter.

PROSE LIFE STORIES

***All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto,* by George M. Johnson.** LGBTQ activist George M. Johnson explores the experience of growing up Black and queer, from flea-marketing with a loving grandmother to complicated first relationships.

***Beyond Magenta: Transgender and Nonbinary Teens Speak Out,* by Susan Kuklin.** Writer and photographer Kuklin met with teens who identify as trans or nonbinary, then compiled trans and nonbinary teens' stories from interviews. Photos and words affirm the right to live with an authentic sense of yourself.

***Brave Face: A Memoir,* by Shaun David Hutchinson.** The subtitle says it all: *How I Survived Growing Up, Coming Out, and Depression.* Hutchinson faces pain head-on and provides a hopeful vision of what life can be when you find the supports you need.

GRAPHIC/VISUAL MEMOIRS

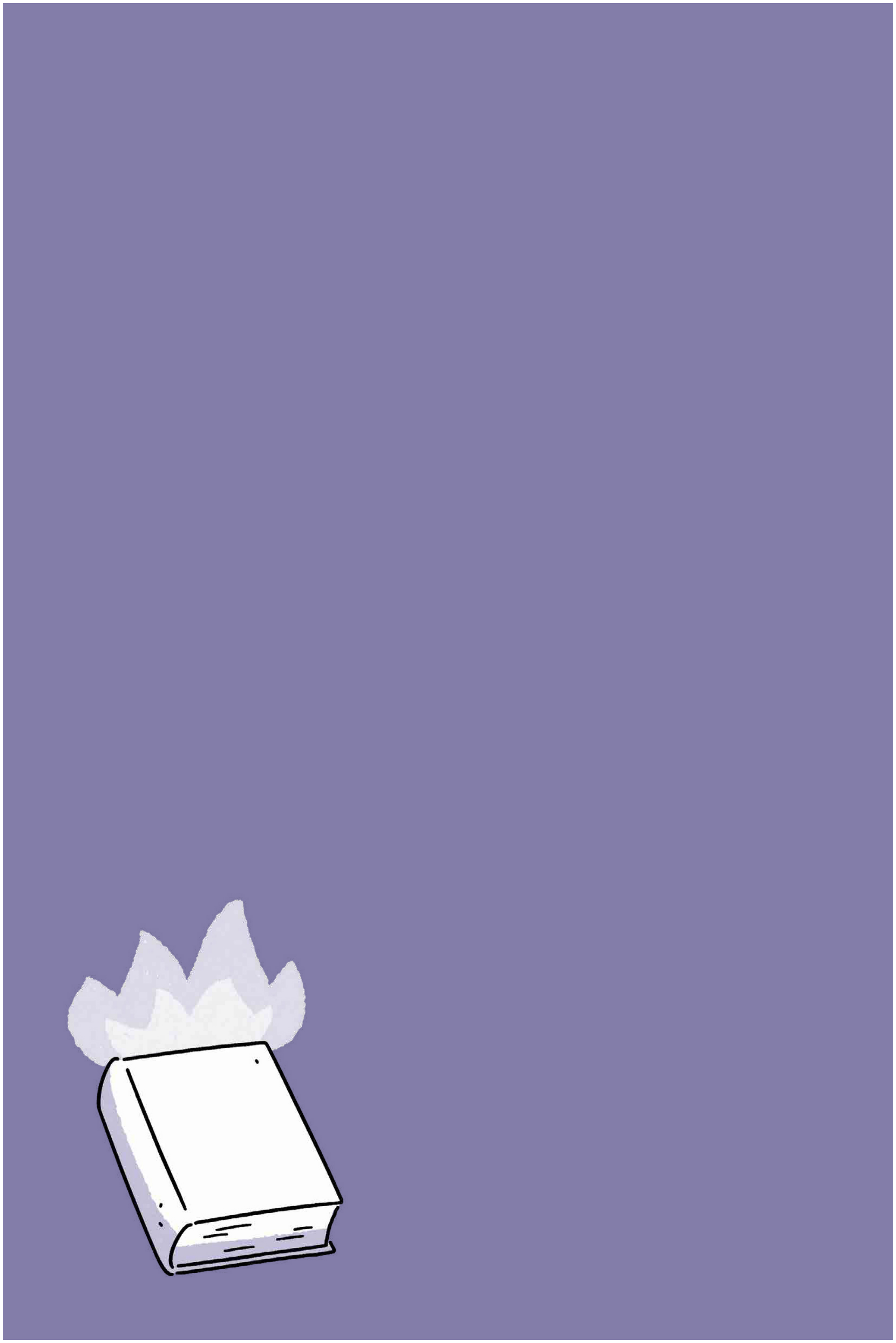
***The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir,* by Thi Bui.** Bui pieces together her parents’ stories of life in Vietnam before and after war changed their lives. Along the way, she considers what these histories meant for her, as a child and now as a mother.

***Gender Queer: A Memoir,* by Maia Kobabe.** Kobabe offers a tender exploration of nonbinary gender identity and of living vibrantly through the challenges of coming home to yourself in the company of family and loved ones.

***Hey, Kiddo: How I Lost My Mother, Found My Father, and Dealt with Family Addiction,* by Jarrett J. Krosoczka.** Krosoczka finds his way through complex relationships with a drug-addicted mother, a missing father, and two unforgettable grandparents.

***Maus: A Survivor’s Tale,* by Art Spiegelman.** This graphic novel tells the story of Art’s father, Vladek, and his struggles to survive the Holocaust, as well as Art’s complex relationship with his father.

***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood,* by Marjane Satrapi.** Follow the intimate drama of girlhood in Iran, through the repression brought on by the Islamic Revolution and the effects of war with Iraq.



ELANA K. ARNOLD

Elana K. Arnold is the author of acclaimed and award-winning books, including the National Book Award finalist *What Girls Are Made Of* and the Michael L. Printz Honor winner *Damsel.* Her novel *The Blood Years* won the Sydney Taylor Book Award and a National Jewish Book Award. Many of her books are Junior Library Guild and "best of" book list selections. Her work has been called "devastatingly vital" and "comfortably familiar and quietly groundbreaking." Elana is on the faculty of Hamline University's MFA program in writing for children and teens. She lives in Southern California with her family and a menagerie of pets.

THE THINGS, THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED, THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO ME.

BY ELANA K. ARNOLD

It’s early November, 2023.

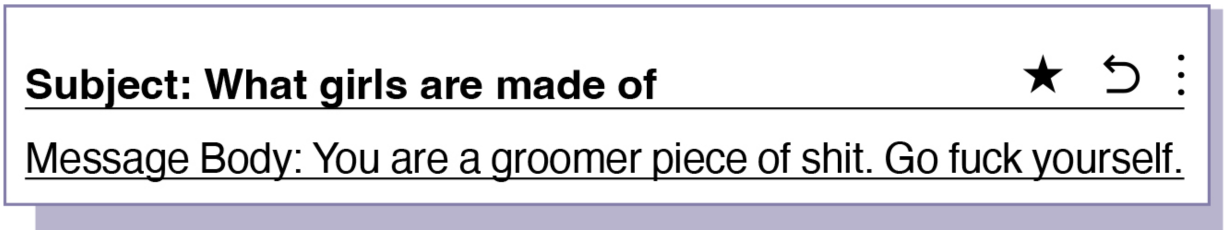
I wake, legs under my eighty-pound sheepdog, right arm curved to cradle my cat. Before opening my eyes, I remember there is something I have to do today. I fish in the murk of memory, trying to grasp it: Is it a doctor’s appointment? A meeting? No. Today is Saturday.

Has that deadline caught up with me—the essay for the anthology that I’ve been struggling to write? There is so much I want to say but, lacking the proper container in which to say it, I haven’t been able to start. No, it’s not the deadline. The essay can wait a little longer. The words will come.

At last, I remember. Brunch, with an old high school friend. Benji. In town just for a few days for a conference, he’s made time to meet up with me. I’ll pick him up at his hotel near the convention center. He will tell me about his wife, their baby. We’ll drink coffee. It’s going to be a good day.

I extract myself from beneath the sheepdog and the cat. The sheepdog groans; the cat darts off. I pick up my phone from the bedside table, check the time, see my inbox pop up with notifications. I scroll through messages until I see a subject line that reads *What Girls Are Made Of*. One of my novels.

I click.



Subject: What girls are made of

Message Body: You are a groomer piece of shit. Go fuck yourself.

My thumb darts to send the email to the trash, to bury it. But the feeling rises first: I am bad. I am wrong. I'm in trouble. *Hide,* my body tells me. *Get small, head down. Hide.* I hate that this is my impulse. It's something I explore in my work—my reflex toward fear, toward shame, toward silence. Fight, flight, freeze, fawn. I am a freezer and a fawner. No fight in me, no speed. Shame laps at me, that familiar tide rising.

* * *

Later, with Benji. He shows me the photos of his baby—a boy, just one year old. My kids are older than he and I were when we met, at the beginning of my senior year of high school.

Benji is kind to the server who seats us at the café, listens carefully, nods as she tells us the daily specials.

How have I let this person go?

It rises higher, the shame wave, this time from a different direction—here's a person, a good person, who loved me, once. And how many years has it been since we sat together, laughed?

"Tell me," Benji asks, leans forward, earnest. "How do I make sure I'm raising a feminist son?"

It's the sort of question I love, and I bask in the good feeling of having answers. The other feeling, the shame, pulls away like the tide of the sea.

Later, when I drive him back to the hotel, I don't want to say goodbye. I don't want to let him go. I ask, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Having dinner with a friend."

Maybe it's his tone, maybe it's the way he adjusts his body, turning away—just a fraction—or maybe it's something else, some other animal sense I'm not even aware of, that makes me ask, "Which friend?"

“Danny Wheeler,” he says.

“Danny Wheeler,” I repeat. “That guy.”

I remember Danny Wheeler. He and Benji were best friends.

“Why did that guy hate me?” I ask.

Benji clears his throat. “It’s not so much that he hated you,” he says. “It’s more that you … hated him.”

“*I* hated him?”

Benji nods.

I reach back, try to remember. “Why?”

Benji shifts, pulls the seat belt strap away from his chest as if it’s too tight. “Because of the thing that happened with the guys in your dorm,” he says. “And how Danny took their side. They were in the same fraternity. Remember?”

* * *

The thing that happened was this: About six weeks into the first quarter of my first year at college, as a freshman at UC Davis, I went into the room of two boys across the hall from me. It was late morning. The dorm was quiet. My three roommates were in class. I was bored. I was probably a little bit lonely.

There was a joint. Did I smoke it? I don’t remember now, it’s been so many years. There was music, I think; they were the kind of boys who would have music playing. Across the hall, my room was a suite, two closet-sized spaces, each with a pair of twin beds, on either side of a main room, with four desks. This room was a double. Just two beds, two desks, two boys.

I don’t remember the music, but I remember the weight of one of the boys when he lay on top of me, his body pinning me deep into the beanbag on the floor. I remember the razor blade in his hand. I remember the weight of the other boy’s gaze as he watched, his eyelids heavy, his mouth soft and passive. I remember being trapped by them, the body and the gaze. “I could rape you right now,” the boy atop me whispered, and I was afraid.

Just like the two beds, the two desks, the two boys, the language that trapped me was twinned: his lazy declaration that he "could" rape me, right now, right then, and my understanding of how language worked—often someone said one thing to me, but they didn't mean it, they were just joking, or teasing, and if I got offended or made a big deal, that was *my* fault, not theirs, I should learn to take a joke, I should stop being such a nerd, such a tight-ass, such a Jew.

Language layered upon language—this boy's words, and before that, when I was younger, all the other boys' languages, layered and folded and layered again. It was too bad I was so flat-chested, my legs would look better if I shaved them, I looked like such a retard, the way I stared off into space, what was wrong with me? My laugh was obnoxious, there was something stuck in my teeth, why was I so disgusting? Look at that ass in those shorts, pretty sexy actually, did I get off when I was riding my horse? I must, that's why girls like to ride, after all. Those words, layered and folded over the language of other boys, of men. My journalism teacher, as he watched me eat a microwaved pastry during zero period: "I'd like to take a bite of *your* honey bun." The Spanish teacher—his language, as he kneeled beside my desk, his hand on my bare knee: "I just can't concentrate when I'm looking into your beautiful eyes." My eighth-grade English teacher, who I so admired, who'd told me I was smart, I was special, and who whispered, "I'll miss you next year," after he kissed me on the mouth on the last day of class. The gymnastics coach who told me that my splits—I was the best in the whole class at doing the splits, I could do them in all three directions, left leg forward, right leg forward, and the middle splits, too—he said that my splits "would come in real handy in a couple of years," with a leer and a grin that made me feel afraid and ashamed, even though I didn't understand what he meant. And back, and back, and back, so far back that I can't remember the first time the language of boys and men made me feel that way—small, afraid, ashamed.

If I screamed, if I made a fuss, if I didn't laugh off what was happening in the dorm room, would I be making a big deal out of nothing? After all, the boy wasn't *actually* raping me. His penis, erect, pressed against the curve of my vulva, but our flesh was separated by his jeans and mine. His knee had pushed mine open, his hand held a razor blade to my wrist, but he didn't actually cut me, he didn't actually put his penis inside me, so why was I making such a big deal of it, why was I such a fucking nerd all the time, about everything?

* * *

In my book *What Girls Are Made Of,* the main character's mother tells her, "As long as there have been women, there have been ways to punish them for being women."

In the dorm room where something happened, after the boy with the razor let me go, I ran to the shared women's bathroom. I went to the farthest shower stall, sank to the cold tile floor, and sobbed into my sleeve, trying not to make too much noise.

And back in my room, I locked the door. It felt silly and performative. I wasn't ever in any *real* danger, after all, was I? When the phone rang, I answered. It was my mother, and when she heard that I'd been crying, she demanded to know why. When I told her—reluctantly, because I shouldn't be making such a big deal over something that didn't actually happen, they didn't *actually* rape me—she insisted that I call the police. When I refused, she called them herself, and the boys were arrested. (It *was* a crime, it turned out, to hold a girl down by her wrists, to hold a razor blade above her wrist and press an erection into her vulva, even on top of her clothes, to watch these proceedings with lidded eyes—"false imprisonment with the intent of malice," that was the name of the crime. A felony, actually.)

The boys were arrested, led away from the dorms. One of the boys—the one who watched—dropped out of school and moved back to Visalia. The other boy, the one who didn't rape me, but had wanted me to know that he *could*—he didn't drop out. His father was a lawyer, and he used language too, and he made things better for his boy. Danny Wheeler had been angry with me because of what happened to these boys. And Benji—I'm remembering, now, as I sit here, so many years later, as he unclicks the seat belt … Danny Wheeler and I were both his friends, and Benji hadn't wanted to "take sides."

It wasn't long before I left UC Davis too. I left because of the nightmares and the looks from the other boys and the anger from people like Danny Wheeler—"You're really going to ruin both their lives over some stupid mistake?" Nothing really *happened,* after all. There was no reason to ruin their lives. There was no reason to make such a *big deal* out of nothing, or something that had only "happened" to me.

Benji and I faded from each other's lives. I hadn't wanted to make too big a deal over something that had happened in a dorm room, or over how Danny reacted to it, or over Benji's silence. So I never told Benji how terribly hurt I was by his neutrality. I stayed quiet, and simply drifted away.

* * *

I'm a grown woman now. I'm a writer. I make my living by using words. I get letters from readers who tell me that they see themselves in my stories. That they didn't realize they were in an abusive relationship until they read my book. That my books put their feelings into words. And yet, still I hesitate to explain to Benji how I am feeling, what I am remembering, in this moment in the car, the power of erasure in the structure of his phrase—"Because of the thing that happened." Even now, I don't want to make him *feel bad.*

"The thing that happened with the guys in your dorm" is a phrase with no aggressor. If it's even a crime, it's victimless.

"I don't want to make him feel bad" is the opposite. The aggressor is clear—if I speak, it's me. The victim is also clear: "him." And the crime? To *make* him *feel bad.*

I love language. I love it so much. And yet sometimes it seems that language does not love me back.

* * *

The thing that happened in your dorm.

You are a groomer piece of shit. Go fuck yourself.

* * *

The way I see it, my job is to look closely at what compels me. What scares me. What repulses, what thrills, what obsesses, what delights, what horrifies. And then to press at those places, and to transform them into story. For whatever reason, most of those places I press are inside myself. They are the meat of me, the memory.

I am alone in my car driving home; I am a freshman in college sobbing in the shower stall. It's the strangest feeling. I'm not just *remembering* that girl—I *am* her. I feel her jittery unease, her fear, the lank and stretch of her limbs, the twist and crouch of her soul.

At home, I pace until the feeling fades, until the girl leaves and I am just middle-aged me again, such a relief to let go of that haunting, and I go to my phone and text Benji.

> The conversation we started right as we said goodbye has really shaken me … I wonder if you might have time to see me again while you're here? I'd love to talk some more if you're up for it.

He responds almost at once:

> Hey Elana, Absolutely. How about Monday Night?

* * *

It's not that I *want* to talk through my surfaced memories with Benji. I don't *want* to explain the visitation from my college-aged self, resurrected by his words. I don't look forward to laying it out: the way it's rape culture, all of it—what the boys did to me, of course (not "what happened in the dorm room," what *they did to me)*; Danny Wheeler's insistence that his friends' lives "shouldn't be ruined" over a joke I failed to get; Benji's desire for neutrality; my own inability to speak up—in the room, to the authorities, to Danny Wheeler, to Benji. More, it's that if I don't explain to Benji how deeply he hurt me and why I pulled away, and how *weird* it is that I've reframed all of this to make myself the reason our friendship faded, if I don't say: "This is rape culture in action. We were rape culture" … then I am perpetuating rape culture, still.

This is what I tell him Monday night. It feels so good to say these things carefully, and clearly, and out loud. And Benji hears me. He really does. He listens, and nods, and tells me how sorry he is, that he wishes he had done better, then. We cry; we embrace. I am comforted.

But as we pay the bill, Benji confesses—a bit chagrined—that he isn't going to bring this up with Danny Wheeler.

My friend Benji is a good man. He wants to raise a feminist son. He asked my advice. I have done my best with what I have—language—to explain things to him. We hug again as we say goodbye, but as I watch him drive away, I'm left with the feeling that I didn't do a good enough job, that if I'd done more, done better, he would have seen how the layers, all the way back, all the way down, are fused one to the next.

Back home, that email is still waiting for me.

> Message: You are a groomer piece of shit. Go fuck yourself.

I could try again here. I could write a response to this email. I could explain how I became the person I am, the woman I am, the writer I am. How I managed to find a voice in my midthirties, at last, at last. How *What Girls Are Made Of,* the book this person finds so offensive, is the art I've made out of the things, the things that happened, the things that happened to me.

In a dorm room.

In a classroom.

In a gym.

In a bar.

I could try to help this stranger understand that my fiction, which they find so offensive, is based on what happened to *me* when I was a young adult, a teen, a child. I might tell them that I, too, am offended. I am offended by the stew of violations and fears that took away my voice, and all the work it took to find it, and the work it's taking right now, here, every day, to hold on to it.

But it's not my job to convince a stranger who hates me not to hate me, or even to explain feminism—true feminism—to my friend. My job, same as it's always been, is to transform pain into art.

And so, instead of composing another text to my friend or an email to the internet stranger, instead of giving away my words, I begin, at last, to write the essay for the anthology. To tell the truth, the best way I can.

* * *

Addendum: Late one night in February 2024, after this essay was completed and had gone through copy edits, I got a phone call from Benji. He wanted me to know he's been thinking a lot about our conversation, and he plans to have that talk with Danny Wheeler after all.

Note: Names have been changed.

KNOW YOUR BODY AND YOUR CHOICES

Book-banning enthusiasts are pretty much obsessed with sex—and turning anything to do with bodies into something “dirty” or “obscene.” Sure, their obsession says more about them than it does about teen bodies. Still, young people are the ones who get harmed when bans target inclusive sex ed resources, health guides, and books about reproductive rights.

Book banners say they just want to protect teens from inappropriate material, but they end up creating stigma around information that matters to anybody with a body … which is all of us. These books provide important information and perspective on how we change, express our genders, stay healthy, explore sexuality, and exercise choice about our own bodies.

Sexual Health and Consent

***It Doesn’t Have to Be Awkward: Dealing with Relationships, Consent, and Other Hard-to-Talk About Stuff,* by Drew Pinsky and Paulina Pinsky**

***Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human,* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan**

***Wait, What?: A Comic Book Guide to Relationships, Bodies, and Growing Up,* by Heather Corinna and Isabella Rotman**

You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things, by Cory Silverberg and Fiona Smyth

LGBTQ+ Resources and Health Care

This Book Is Gay, by Juno Dawson (one of the most-banned books in the US)

Breathe: Journeys to Healthy Binding, by Maia Kobabe and Dr. Sarah Peitzmeier

The Pride Guide: A Guide to Sexual and Social Health for LGBTQ Youth, by Jo Langford

A Quick & Easy Guide to Queer & Trans Identities, by Mady G. and Jules Zuckerberg

Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth

Reproductive Rights

Jane Against the World: Roe v. Wade *and the Fight for Reproductive Rights,* by Karen Blumenthal

My Body My Choice: The Fight for Abortion Rights, by Robin Stevenson

DANCING WITH HATERS

BY ASHLEY HOPE PEREZ

Whether I'm dealing with book bans or writing novels, I use words to transform pain, to dance away hate and injustice. My books address the harsh realities that many teens face. Once I put those hardships on the page, I have the chance to transform them. It's difficult, and often uncomfortable, but I know that it matters.

Sure, the haters will be back, but I will free myself from their words as many times as I need to.

Note: The echoes in this poem are based on real messages—hate mail and notes of support—that I've received over recent years. I didn't keep their exact phrasing. This is how they sound in my head as I try to write.

You can try your best to use your gifts

your best is *filth.* This book
makes my hands shake in anger.

for good, to shake the world

the world of evil you
promote needs to be
locked up, just like you.

with the truth that young people need,

young people need uplifting,
wholesome stories, not
the vile lies you tell.

to write about real bodies

real bodies don’t belong in books.
Pretend there is no pain, no
periods, no sex, no bruises,
no history of violence.

so that a person like you—

a person like you is no better
than a slut or hooker in my book.

like you at 15, 16, 17 years old—

15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds do
not need to read this pornographic
sick puke. you want to shatter
their innocent view of humanity.

can talk back to the shame,

shame on the pig who wrote this.

She should hang herself!!

ask questions, name harm as harm

you harm by forcing your
ugly past on young people.

Literature can take us

take us at our word, we are coming
for you. first your books. then you.

where memory sometimes won’t go,

we won’t go away until we’ve
cleansed our schools of all the
porn and indoctrination you
push onto children.

where pain was, where silence

silence is all we want from you.
Everything was FINE until perverts
like you stirred things up.

makes it seem there’s no way

there is no way you can say
this trash belongs in a library.

out of darkness.

Out of Darkness is not literature. You
pollute our children. Why not put

something positive in kids' minds?

* * *

There is a way.

Out of darkness,

Out of Darkness allows readers
to experience other people's joy,
their hopes, their fears.

I weave beauty, I shine light

light needs to be shed on
stories we don't usually want
to look at.

where pain is, where silence

silence about difficult issues
is the danger, not your book.
I'm so glad you speak out.
Why are people so afraid
of the truth?

teaches children to blame themselves

the selves of Black kids, brown
kids, queer kids—our very selves
are being erased. We must fight.

for being harmed, or for surviving,

surviving is the minimum.
I wanted beautiful long lives
for your characters.

or for loving who they love.

love shines through your book.
Please keep showing young
people that they are not alone,
that they belong.

Fools give liberty a dirty name

every dirty name flung at you
probably better describes the person
sending the hate mail.

when they claim that it’s harmful

it’s harmful when adults
with no training take away
resources from teens.

to write about harm. They are wrong.

wrongheaded people won’t
win forever. We will keep
reading and finding books.

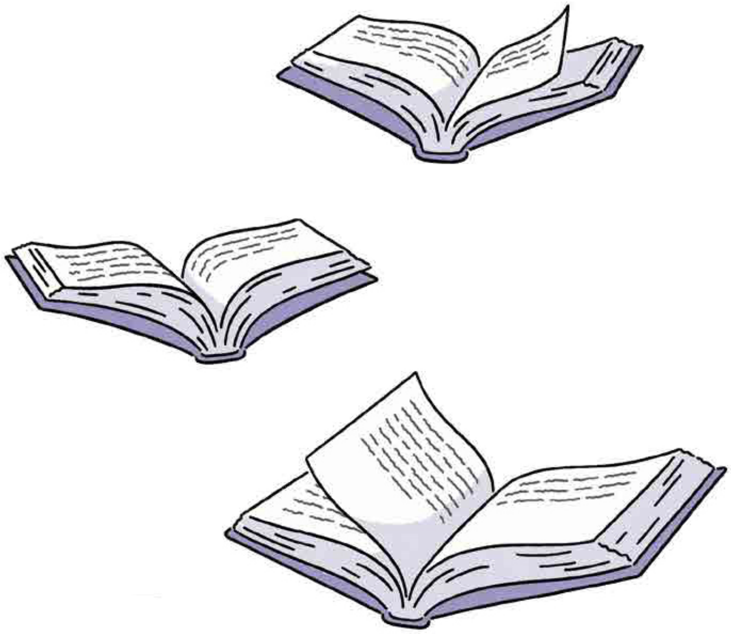
The harm is silence. The harm is shame.

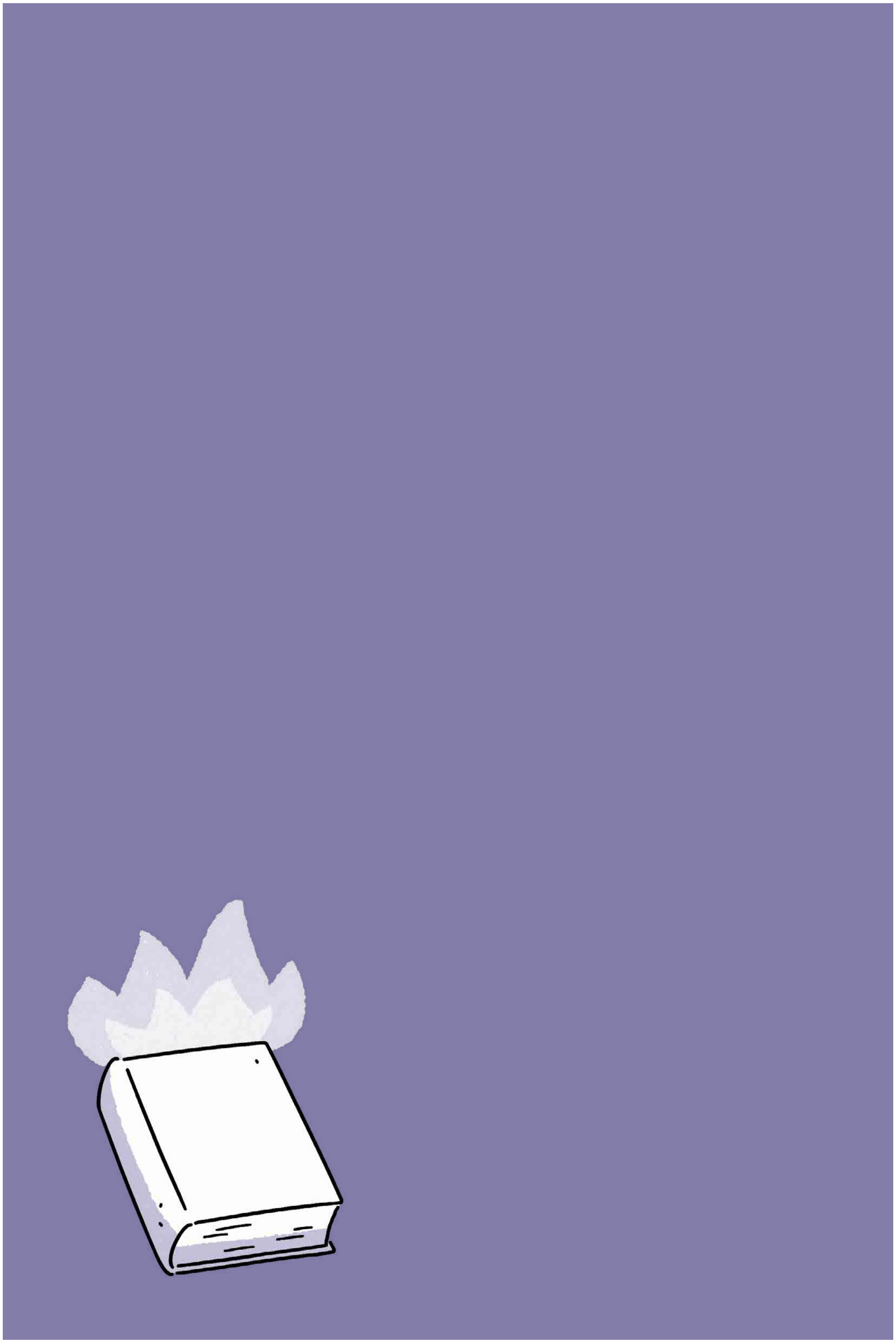
shame on those who do not

want to face how we have failed
as a nation, or what it
will take to really change.

Every time I hear the shrill voices,
every time I read of another ban,
every time I receive a hateful letter,
I endure a momentary descent
into darkness. I am seven. A hand
covers my mouth. My body
is not mine anymore.
I cannot speak.
I cannot tell.
I cannot make it stop.
It is like this with the old wounds.
They reopen so easily.
But they heal more deeply each time
I pull myself toward the light
of my own life, full and bright and true.
My grown voice will tell and tell and tell.
I tell what I could not tell as a child.
I name harm for harm. I reckon with the ugly.
Not to wallow in it or accept it,
but to challenge and transform it.

I will keep writing as if I am free
until I make myself free,
until I write my way out of darkness,
lighting my own way home.
I will keep writing.





BILL KONIGSBERG

Bill Konigsberg is the award-winning author of seven young adult novels. *The Porcupine of Truth* won a Stonewall Book Award and a PEN Center USA Literary Award, and *Openly Straight,* which has been optioned for a limited series, has been published in seven languages. All seven of Bill's books relate to the LGBTQ experience and have been banned in multiple states. Bill lives in Phoenix with his husband, Chuck, and their two labradoodles, Mabel and Buford, who bark at potential book banners from Bill's office window.

GROOMER

BY BILL KONIGSBERG

When I was a journalist in my twenties, I was covering a political rally at Hartford City Hall, and a young girl, perhaps eight, tugged on my jacket.

"Excuse me, sir. I can't find my mother," she said. I had a press pass, so maybe she thought I looked official.

I immediately put my notebook away. "Okay, let me help you find her," I said. "Can you tell me what she looks like?"

"She's the mayor," the girl said.

I said I would make sure we found her mom. I started by asking a nearby police officer. He got on his radio, trying to locate the mayor. A strange, alien-to-me feeling went through my chest, something like panic, dread, and recognition knotted together. I got down on my knees to be eye to eye with the young, frightened girl.

"You're safe with us," I said. "We're not going to leave your side until we find your mom. Okay?"

The girl nodded, and I stood up before she could see a tear fall from my eye.

"You're safe," I repeated, almost to myself. I glanced down, and in a moment I will never forget, I saw something in her eyes that said, *Okay, weird adult. I get it. I'm safe. Overreact much?*

She knew she was safe; I was just beginning to understand that, as a child, I had not been.

* * *

It's hard to talk about why I was so upset that day. My reasons don't exactly qualify as what most people consider polite conversation. But also, it's true, it's important, and I'm not the only person ever to be dealt such a hand.

As a young teenager, I was sexually abused by adult men.

I didn't think of it as abuse at the time. It wasn't until my late twenties, right around the time I was in Hartford, that I came across a photo of me at fourteen and remembered, *Oh yeah. That was the year I lost my virginity to a guy who was probably forty-five.*

I stared at the photo, me with my acne, my braces, my pronounced overbite, and my melancholy expression. In that moment, I understood for the first time that I had been telling myself a story about what happened to me as a teen. And that story wasn't true—not completely.

The story went like this: I was neglected as a child and a young adolescent. Feeling unloved and uncared for, I used my special ability, as a precocious person mature beyond my years, to find affection in adult gay men. I was in control of it all, and it was fine.

Some of that story is true. I was mature for my age, always wowing teachers with my emotional intelligence and older-than-my-years wit. In ninth grade, we had to write parables in English class. While most of my classmates were recycling the parable of the prodigal son, with its messages about unconditional love, I wrote a short piece about a disappointing son and a father who didn't seem to love him. (I was certainly able to draw from my own life.) The twist was the ending. The meaning of the parable, I explained, was "Never have a son."

"Nice twist! Dry wit, à la Woody Allen. I love it!" my teacher wrote.

I loved making teachers laugh. I cherished proving that I was cool, smart, adult-like. And their approval and admiration made me feel special.

All of this was true. The untruth? That I was in control.

Little did I know, what began as appropriate encouragement from that teacher quickly advanced into more questionable and personal engagement that steadily groomed me to see an unequal relationship as "normal." Looking back, I imagine that my English teacher could see a beacon over my head that projected my vulnerability: *Different. Eager to please. Easy to manipulate.*

I'll call that teacher Gerald Thomas. More about him later.

Also untrue in the story that I told myself: that my desire to be appreciated by older men, and where it led me, were fine. The desire resulted in a sexual relationship with that teacher—and other older men—when I was a young teen. That wasn't fine. Not in the least.

My anger isn't as intense as it once was, but it bubbles up when I think of how isolated I was back then, and how these selfish, dangerous adults preyed on those feelings.

In addition to its being wrong to manipulate an underage person into a sexual relationship, what men like Mr. Thomas did put me in harm's way. When I was a teen, the AIDS epidemic was just beginning. Nowadays, AIDS can be a managed chronic illness. But back in the eighties, none of the lifesaving treatments we have today existed. Contracting AIDS was a full-on death sentence. When I think about how grown adults played Russian roulette with my life by having unprotected sex with me, my righteous, viscous rage bubbles hotter and higher.

This is not an essay about gay men being groomers—though surely some are, as my teen experience made me painfully aware. This is an essay about what it feels like to be a survivor of grooming. It is an essay about what it feels like, as an adult, to make the active choice to be a helper for young people. Always. It is an essay about what it means to be determined to protect others from that experience, and then to have people call *me* a groomer and a pedophile for having written books that portray young LGBTQ+ characters.

In Hartford, helping the mayor's daughter find her mother helped me understand something about myself. In that moment, I realized that I needed to use the hurt I had endured to act in support of others. That tight feeling in my chest was a reminder that, whatever harm had come to me, I was a helper at heart and would let that guide me.

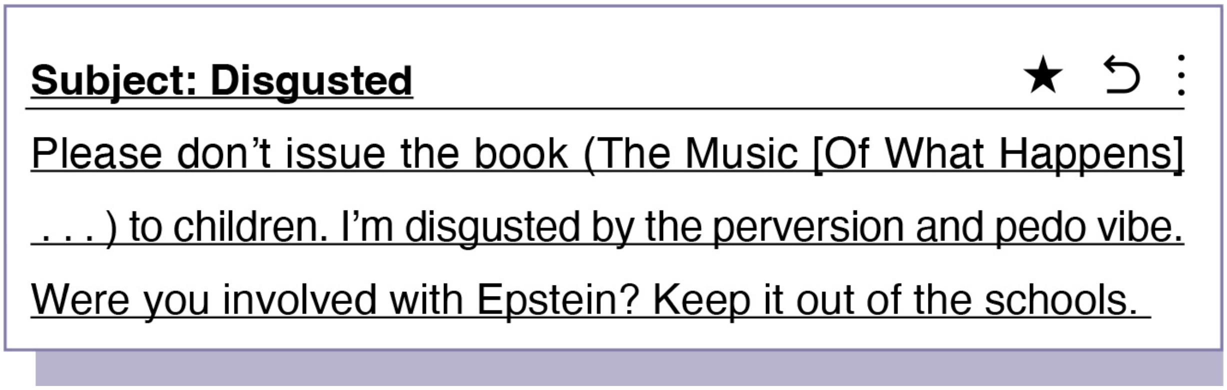
Not long after that, I wrote my first young adult novel. Writing has been my way of doing something to help kids experience safety in their lives.

The stories I tell make a difference in preventing what happened to me from happening to other kids. These books create mirrors for LGBTQ+ youth to see themselves in literature. I didn't have that growing up, and I'm proud to be part of the generation of writers who insisted that these mirrors must exist in literature for teens. I don't need to guess about whether my books have saved lives; the emails I've received from readers over the past decade and a half have told me so.

When I started writing for teens, it was quite new to include queer experiences in writing for that audience. My first book came out in 2008. That year, only thirty or so young adult novels received consideration for the Lambda Literary Award honoring LGBTQ children's and young adult literature. There was a ton of scrutiny on the authors of those books—much of it hostile—and I had to grow a thick skin to deal with the homophobia thrown my way. After my debut, *Out of the Pocket,* won the 2008 Lambda Literary Award, I received a swarm of hate mail. Most of it was from people who couldn't spell, telling me I was going to hell. It hurt, but I could handle it; what mattered was that I was reaching readers whose experiences had been left out before.

The number of LGBTQ+ young adult novels has skyrocketed over the years, bringing more representation and increasing access to mirrors for all kinds of identities. Ironically, as most of the world has become more supportive—or at least tolerant—of LGBTQ+ people, the homophobic minority has doubled down by targeting books about our experiences, as if erasing our stories is a way to protest growing acceptance of diversity. The movement to ban books with LGBTQ+ characters has grown exponentially, and so have the expressions of hatred I receive.

For example, here's an email I received on a Saturday in early January of 2023:



Subject: Disgusted

Please don’t issue the book (The Music [Of What Happens] . . .) to children. I’m disgusted by the perversion and pedo vibe. Were you involved with Epstein? Keep it out of the schools.

I felt like I’d been hit in the stomach. What? What was this person even talking about? What did their comments have to do with my book, and did they understand that teenagers, not “children,” were the ones reading it?

On Instagram, I received several similar messages, and nasty comments on a post about my dog Mabel. One stranger called me a “sick groomer.” Another called me a pedophile and a child rapist. Each of these comments twisted in my gut. I *knew* they weren’t true, of course, but there was something so perverse about being called these names when my work was precisely about giving young people resources to stay safe, to accept and value themselves so as not to be vulnerable to grooming.

I did some sleuthing and found that a blog had posted a video of a mother at a school board meeting in Orange County, California. Despite the fact that my book is a young adult novel intended for readers fourteen and up, the mother ranted about how I had written it to initiate first graders into the “gay lifestyle.” She called me a pervert, a pedophile, and a groomer.

That’s when the comments and messages from strangers began rolling in.

The people who filled my inboxes with insults hadn’t read my book. They had listened to someone talk about my book, someone who clearly couldn’t have read my book very closely, if at all. Many of them referred to “buttsex” and “balls.” To this day I don’t know where the “buttsex” and “balls” references came from. The only scene in the book that is remotely sexual features a seventeen-year-old boy who doesn’t know that he has the right to say no to a sexual encounter with another teen. It follows the dissociative thoughts of the victim rather than the physical act, and the only thing it "promotes" is greater understanding of the importance of consent.

As I said, I have developed a pretty thick skin over the years. I've had to. Coming out as gay in the 1980s will do that to you. Ditto for being an LGBTQ+ young adult author early to the scene.

But this era of book banning, and the rhetoric tossed around by book banners and their trolls, was different. Hearing words like "groomer" and "child rapist" attached to me hit me in a place that was unarmored.

I cratered.

I developed a terrible case of shingles. I got into bed, and I stayed there for a week. I could not shake the feeling that I was being assaulted. Again.

Strangers had pointed to the thing about my identity that I am most proud of—that I am an author who writes so that teens will not feel alone in their struggles, that I am doing important work to help improve the world for young LGBTQ+ people—and claimed that it was something ugly, dirty, shameful. The assault of their words triggered feelings of helplessness and being out of control. I experienced something akin to reliving my own victimhood.

On the one hand, I understand objectively that I am not a groomer or a pedophile. On the other hand, even forty years later, I am still healing from the wounds of what happened to me as a teen.

When I was a teen, the discourse about gay people never included gay people. I heard only what was written *about* gay people. There were no books that I knew of that included gay people. There were no TV shows with queer characters, and very few movies. In those shows and movies, gay people were the joke. The punch line. Or they were the sacrifice. The person who must die at the end of the story.

It was a time when the only things said in "polite society" about gays were stereotypes. Jokes about the new disease killing *faggots.* "What does AIDS stand for?" was one joke that went around when I was in ninth grade. "Anally Inserted Death Sentence."

Another: "What does GAY stand for? Got AIDS Yet?"

There were cruel, demeaning jokes everywhere, but no books to read, no TV shows to watch for any instance of positive inclusion. One day in ninth grade, I'd skulked over to the school library and surreptitiously looked up "homosexuality" in the card catalog, fully ready to flip to "horticulture" should someone come by.

No books were listed. I found a few magazine articles—every single one about the new disease that was killing people.

I also looked in the encyclopedia. It hadn't been updated since 1971, and it wasn't until 1973 that the American Psychological Association ruled that homosexuality was not a mental illness. So that day, staring at the encyclopedia in my school library, I read that I was mentally ill. Then I went to lunch, where jokes about people like me bounced around the cafeteria.

Eventually I found my English teacher. Gerald Thomas. I worked up the nerve to tell him I was gay. I wasn't sure if he was, but I knew he was open-minded.

"Finally!" Mr. Thomas said. Apparently, he was gay and had known I was too. I was so relieved. I finally had someone to talk to. I had so many questions. I had so much I didn't know, and no one to turn to before Mr. Thomas.

It turned out that Mr. Thomas wasn't who I needed him to be.

I needed someone who would listen as I talked about how alone I felt. I needed someone who would tell me that I was okay, that there was nothing wrong with me, that what was messed up was our homophobic world.

What I got was groomed.

It took a few years for Mr. Thomas's grooming to reach fruition. It started with him telling me to call him Gerald. Later, he'd take me into the teachers' lounge and out to a back patio where he could smoke and we could talk freely. I felt so special, getting to do something other students couldn't do. He laughed at all my jokes and said "Bless your heart" a lot—he was from Texas. He'd touch my leg affectionately. He told me I was cute, and he encouraged me to explore the gay world on my own, as he had when he had been my age. He told me about the places where I might meet gay adults. His constant compliments kept me going during very tough, isolating times. When my parents struggled with my coming out, he told me, “Screw them. I wish you could move in with me.”

I fell in love. Or at least that’s what I thought it was. I thought falling in love with Gerald was my idea. I had no idea that he was manipulating me or —as I later learned—that he’d done it before.

From the moment things began with Gerald, my childhood ceased. Thanks to his suggestions, I went from playing baseball by myself in the backyard of my father’s country house to being sexualized in just about every encounter I had with a male adult. As a teen, sex with adults was never far from the forefront of my mind.

I didn’t learn to trust myself. Instead, I was catapulted into a secret adult world where honesty and trust no longer made sense. Gerald had explained to me how anonymous sex was a revolutionary act, and that gay men were thumbing their noses at the establishment when they did it. I wanted to be with Gerald; I wanted him to hold me, to choose me. When he didn’t make that available at first, the only way to gain his approval was to have sex with other men. It felt good in the moment but left me feeling even more lonely. And that’s where the secret world came in. Prior to this, I had never had a secret from my parents. Now I was doing something that made me feel ashamed, that I was sure would make them reject me. As I tried to get closer to Gerald, I became isolated from my family.

Mr. Thomas’s grooming culminated in sex when I was seventeen. At the time, I thought I was lucky and powerful to have been able to make someone like him see me as a sexual being, to see me as desirable. It took me years to understand that he’d seen me that way from the very beginning.

I can only assume that the adult men who were doing these things with me—Mr. Thomas included—were victims of toxic environments where there were no positive images of queer people in media, where there was nothing, nothing but stigma and secrecy.

It took many years of hard work, and access to resources I didn’t have at the time, to change and heal.

Chief among those resources were the books that were missing from the library's card catalog that day. What I wouldn't have given, as a teenager, to encounter a single book that explored the feelings of another gay teen. To have known that I wasn't alone in how I felt, and to have read a story where Mr. Thomas's conduct was called out for what it was: predatory behavior.

In the end, I became the author of the very books that would have saved me from decades of heartache and dysfunction. I have been the voice of hope and recognition that I needed, and I have shared that voice with young people around the world. This matters so much to me. I have been a light in the world for young people struggling with other people's prejudice and the challenges of adolescence. I chose to be this light, over and over, rather than be engulfed in darkness—or perpetuate it. To me, that's everything.

The many hundreds if not thousands of emails I have received from young readers over the last fifteen years have helped me understand the true value of writing for LGBTQ+ youth. This was one of the very first emails I ever received:

> I have just finished your book a couple of hours ago. Out of the Pocket is one of the best books I've ever read. Bobby's feelings and insights are exactly what I'm feeling. I'm gay and in the pocket, so to speak. The whole being alone thing Bobby talks about because he is gay is something I can relate to. Every family thing I do I think of how this would be different if I was out. I'm so scared because my dad is really anti gay. I have never told anybody these feelings/thoughts because I have never met anyone gay or anyone I felt comfortable to tell. I feel I can trust you because 1. You don't know my family so you can't tell them and 2. You're gay so you know what I'm going through. I hope you can give me some advice. I feel bad burdening you this way, but I have no Bryan. Thank you for your book.

Receiving emails like this has changed my life, because when I receive one, I often close my eyes and think of myself as a teenager, and how over-the-moon proud that younger Bill would be to have become part of the solution. My teen self loves reading and rereading these books—by me and by other authors too. Every time I read one, I feel stronger inside, less alone. Those books help me strengthen the voice I have reclaimed, and they help teens feel as though they have a voice.

These are the books that banners want to ban. These are the books that lead them to call me a groomer. But I know the truth: I am the opposite of a groomer, at least in the way they mean it. I do the work I do to help raise healthy, happy queer people. I suppose the two opposites of that would be unhealthy or dead queer people. I know now that book banners don't care if the consequences include these terrible outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.

By taking away their much-needed resources, book banners are leaving queer teens vulnerable to bad actors and setting them up to be groomed.

The people who are leading the way in banning books with LGBTQ+ characters, the people who call me a groomer, want us to go back to the time when anything that might make white, heterosexual people uncomfortable—things about race, things about sexuality, things about gender—went unspoken.

That was the time when LGBTQ+ youth were invisible, and so many of our beloved brothers and sisters ended their lives for lack of being seen, heard, understood.

We won't go back to the time when hate ruled. The books we write are stronger than the bans that attempt to thwart them. Too many people—LGBTQ+ folks and allies—understand the life-or-death importance of these books.

And I have a feeling that a lot of the young people who have been helped by these books will carry the movement forward, making sure that future generations of LGBTQ+ youth are safe. They'll understand that the most important thing adults can do for young people is to allow them to experience their youth and to have the resources that let them thrive.

BOOKS FOR THE YOUNGER PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

Need a gift or a book recommendation? Help inspire a reader *and* resist book bans by sharing one of these books with siblings, cousins, neighbors, and all the younger people in your life.

Books About Bodies and Babies

***Bodies Are Cool,* written and illustrated by Tyler Feder.** This is a love-your-body book with an emphasis on inclusion and acceptance.

***When Aidan Became a Brother,* written by Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Kaylani Juanita.** When Aidan was born, everyone thought he was a girl. So he wants to make sure everything is right for his younger sibling. This book celebrates the many transitions that are part of being a family.

Books That Depict Diverse Families and Communities

***Uncle Bobby's Wedding,* written by Sarah S. Brannen and illustrated by Lucia Soto.** After a magical day with Uncle Bobby and his boyfriend, Chloe realizes that this marriage means more love and family, not less.

***We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga,* written by Traci Sorell and illustrated by Frané Lessac.** This picture book follows a full year of contemporary celebrations and experiences in the Cherokee Nation and highlights how saying *otsaliheliga* is just one part of a broader practice of gratitude.

***Worm Loves Worm,* written by J. J. Austrian and illustrated by Mike Curato.** When two worms fall in love, their friends have questions about who will wear the tux and who will wear the dress at their wedding.

Books That Represent Struggles for Equality

***Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness,* by Anastasia Higginbotham.** A powerful book that invites white children and parents to become curious about racism, accept that it's real, and cultivate justice one interaction at a time.

***Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation,* by Duncan Tonatiuh.** A fight for equal education for a Mexican family in California that unfolded eight years before *Brown v. Board of Education.*

***Sharice's Big Voice: A Native Kid Becomes a Congresswoman*, written by Sharice Davids and Nancy K. Mays and illustrated by Joshua Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley.** This autobiographical picture book teaches that everyone deserves to be seen, represented, and heard, inspiring readers to use their voices.

***Through My Eyes,* by Ruby Bridges.** As a six-year-old in 1960, Ruby Bridges became the first Black student to attend the all-white William Frantz Public School in New Orleans. This is her story, in her words.

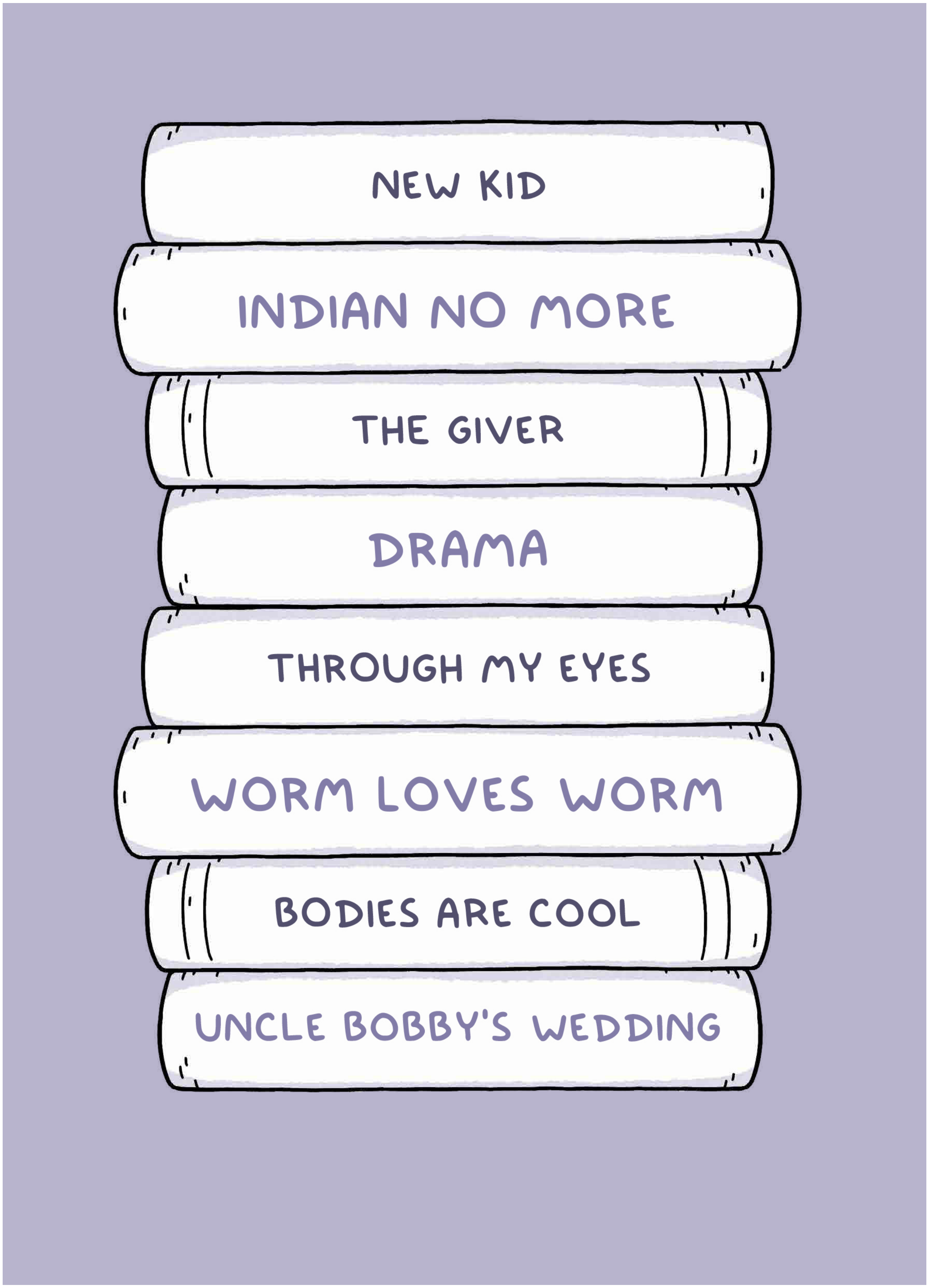
Great Books for Older Kids

***Drama,* by Raina Telgemeier.** A beloved graphic novel that mixes its thoughtful engagement with the anxiety and angst of preteen life with a gentle, undramatic treatment of a character coming out.

***The Giver,* by Lois Lowry.** Twelve-year-old Jonas lives in a seemingly ideal world until he begins to understand the dark secrets behind his fragile community.

***Indian No More,* by Charlene Willing McManis and Traci Sorell.** It's 1957, and Regina Petit's life is turned upside down when a new federal law says her Umpqua tribe no longer exists. Regina becomes "Indian no more" overnight—even though she lives with her tribe and practices tribal customs.

***New Kid,* by Jerry Craft.** A graphic novel about starting over at a private school where diversity is low and the struggle to fit in is real.


NEW KID
INDIAN NO MORE
THE GIVER
DRAMA
THROUGH MY EYES
WORM LOVES WORM
BODIES ARE COOL
UNCLE BOBBY'S WEDDING

BRENDAN KIELY

Brendan Kiely is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *All American Boys* (with Jason Reynolds), *Tradition, The Last True Love Story,* and *The Gospel of Winter.* His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages, received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award and the Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, and was twice selected as one of the American Library Association's Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults. *The Other Talk: Reckoning with Our White Privilege,* was a *School Library Journal* and Chicago Public Library Best Book of the Year. He lives with his wife and son in New York City.

O-TOWN BLUES

BY BRENDAN KIELY

Dear Z,

You don't know me, but I'm writing to tell you what's behind all those exaggerated headlines claiming your book "caused a riot" in your hometown. I'm sure you know that when people trash books like yours, it's got nothing to do with what's actually in the books. As far as I can tell, the people who say they "hate" *O-Town Blues,* like my mom, have never even read it. They've only heard *about* it. A lot of people seem addicted to their own righteous outrage. They eat up gossip and start foaming at the mouth over some made-up bullshit. That's what happened here, anyway. Unfortunately, my own mom had a lot to do with it.

Here's the deal: My name is Cal. I've read your book, and I loved it. This might sound weird, but I feel like we have a lot in common, you and me. I know I'm white and you're Black. I know I'm straight and you're gay. But I've read your book three times, and each time, new things speak to me and spin like a familiar coin in my gut. I mean, you're from here too! I heard you say in an interview that you grew up just a block away from where I live now. My family used to live on the other side of Callahan Park, but when I was ten years old and my dad took off for a fancy new life in Santa Clara with some lady he met at a tech conference, Mom and I moved to a smaller house behind St. Ann's. A street just like yours, where houses lean against each other like crooked teeth.

Whatever has come between us since, I have to remind myself that Mom didn't abandon me like Dad did. She's the one who stayed. She's the one who worked the double shifts down at Veterans Memorial Hospital so there was money for rent and basketball shoes and pizza nights. She held up the shambles of our home. When I was ten, I wrote a homework assignment about her being the strongest person in the world. No joke. Forget Hercules, I said. She was Mom-cu-les.

But in the last few years, a new, more brittle reality set in. It was like the source of her power started running dry, and she went looking for ways to replenish it. She began doubling her time at St. Ann's. Mass every Sunday, then Wednesday nights too. She cut her hair. Got skinnier. Meaner. A whole lot angrier. On weekends, she kept Fox News on all day in the background, and I'd hear her snort with disgust anytime one of the commentators mentioned Black Lives Matter protesters, or radical leftists, or, especially, when they whined about the "woke" agenda.

By the time I finished middle school, the strength I'd once admired in her had morphed into a hardness that, to be honest, kind of scared me. But I was still like, *yeah, whatever, Mom,* because the weird twists in her thinking didn't seem like *that* big a deal—until suddenly they were.

Because there was a girl. Maryam Khan. We were in the same English class sophomore year, and we ended up in a small group together since we'd chosen the same book for summer reading. Guess what book?

We both loved how you wrote about our town and the moments you and the Italian Redhead shared. For me, there was also all that stuff about growing up in a single-parent home and how you were a B-baller like me. For Maryam, it was your insights about racism in our community, your willingness to name something that she knows too well, and that a lot of people around here seem to work awfully hard not to see.

Maryam and I fell for each other like a Slinky slowly springing down the stairs. Our "study group" became an excuse to sit close to each other. The nerdy inside jokes we shared (like calling similes "smileys" and metaphors "meteors") became excuses to bump each other's shoulders on the way out of class, which became excuses to sometimes tickle each other in the hall, which became excuses to sneak away from everyone else and press even closer. Those moments reminded me of how you wrote that every kiss with the Italian Redhead began with the question “Can I?” and the answer “Yes,” in each other’s eyes.

In a way, I have your book to thank for the chance to know Maryam, and also for the first time we kissed. It was sophomore year, and we were on that little patio behind Russo’s Pizza. Maryam and I had been talking about *O-Town Blues* again, and I read her a line I’d underlined in my copy: “the way I see me in your eye, makes me want to cry, because it makes me believe you want me there.”

“Okay,” she said, “so are you going to cry or are you going to kiss me?”

You wrote that, for you and the Redhead, there was so much buildup before your first kiss, so much anxiety, so much anticipation, that when it finally happened, it took you a moment to realize that it was happening. That’s exactly how it felt when Maryam and I first kissed. I recognized the feeling, was able to catch it and know it and savor it, because you’d given me a road map, a language for understanding it all.

Maryam is the brightest person in every room she walks into, and even then I just wanted to bask in her glow. I spent as much time as I could with her, which also meant I got better grades because her parents never argued with a study session. I mean, I was thinking more “study session,” if you get me, but the Khans were clear that they wanted to see the books spread out on the table in their front room. I loved that room with all the framed calligraphic paintings on the wall, swirls and slashes cutting gracefully through white space.

Anytime I was over, Maryam’s mom lingered and hovered. No matter where I looked, there she was. It was like she had this small army of clones dedicated to checking in on us. She was always popping out from behind the furniture or bringing in another bowl of snacks. On the way, she would wag her finger at me about how pop quizzes prepared you for the unknowns life might throw you or some other tidbit of wisdom that reinforced the value of studying hard. Maryam rolled her eyes, but I found it kind of endearing and started calling that finger wag the scepter. I’d say “Yes, ma’am” just to see her mom’s enormous smile rise. I didn’t think about why back then, but now I know: a smile like that makes you feel like you're *home.*

When Mom figured out that Maryam was more than just a study buddy, she started making comments about her to me. It was a weird mix of borderline-racist remarks and things that made it seem like her feelings were hurt that I didn't spend more time at home with her. *You don't have to be her social lifeline, Don't let* them *suck you into their world,* or *Why go there if she's too good to come here?* And when Maryam came with her dad to my basketball games, Mom gave off Ice Queen vibes. There was none of the warmth that Maryam's parents showed me. Maryam's dad didn't seem to take offense, but more than once Maryam asked me why my mom was so rude. I didn't have an answer, at least not one I could even let myself think without gagging a little.

Then one night I was on the phone with Maryam, cracking jokes about the recent history textbook controversy in Texas. Some of them, pandering to extreme conservative politicians, referred to enslaved people as immigrants. One even listed Moses (yes, frigging *part-the-seas* dude) as one of the Founding Fathers of the US. How could we not laugh? Someone actually printed that—in a textbook!

I was mid-joke when Mom came into my bedroom and motioned for me to end the call. As soon as I hung up, she launched in.

"You think you're smart, Cal, but you're naive. You have to watch out for people like her, people who want to unmake what we've built. You can whine about this country's mistakes all you want, it's still the greatest country in the world. Don't let your girlfriend make you hate it." She hovered close, eyes wide and searching, as if she was waiting for me to agree with her.

"Mom, that's ridiculous." I fumbled to say more, but I was so confused by what she said, I couldn't figure out what to say.

"That girl—" Her eyes narrowed. "I think she has an agenda. You should be careful."

"*That girl?* I don't know what this is all about, but I like Maryam. She matters to me." I crossed my arms, still feeling the sting of what she had said. “I like someone. And she likes me. Maybe ditch the conspiracy theories and try being happy for me?”

“Who are you becoming, Cal?” she asked. Her lips trembled.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say something about my grades and making varsity. I wanted to say that, actually, I felt good about who I was becoming. I was the happiest I’d been in a long time, maybe ever. And I hated hearing Mom talk about Maryam that way. But instead of saying any of that, I just sat at the end of the bed and stared at the poster of Jayson Tatum pulling up for a three that was tacked to the wall over my desk. I sat there until she left my room.

I know I should have said more to her. But I just wanted everything to smooth out. And somehow I convinced myself that not saying anything would make it easier.

Also. I was scared.

Looking back, Z, I can see that I wasn’t much different from the “friends” you had on the basketball team, guys who nodded along with you in the locker room but left you hanging later when ugly jokes were slung around at a party. My silence left Maryam hanging, even if she didn’t know it.

Big surprise: things didn’t get better with Mom. They got worse. A few months into junior year, Maryam and I used this book called *Internment,* by Samira Ahmed, for a US history project on Islamophobia. Our project was featured as part of the district’s annual academic showcase, but instead of being proud, Mom went berserk. She’d seen *Internment* on some bullshit Facebook list of “anti-American” books. Instead of reading it, she dove back into the internet and printed off a list of quotations somebody had yanked out of context. “Liberal indoctrination,” she muttered, shaking the page in my face.

“Whatever, Mom.” I blew it off like it was a joke—but why? Why didn’t I stick up for Maryam? She was the real target of everything Mom was spouting off.

In response to Mom’s demand that *Internment* be removed from the library, Principal Cercas sent a simple email. “Although I appreciate your concern, I trust the evaluation of our teachers and librarians with regard to this material. Cultivating students' ability to work with complex, challenging texts and topics is an important part of our work as educators." My mom walked around the house repeating those lines to herself, to me, to her friends on the phone. Somehow, she turned those reasonable, neutral words into a kind of toxic magic spell. And with it, her transformation from hero to mythic gorgon was complete.

She began her personal crusade to purge books from our town's schools and libraries. Fueled by ignorance, she rallied other parents from St. Ann's and even a few people in neighboring towns she'd met online. She hosted meetings in our living room, ranting about how school isn't the place for politics "like that." From what I heard through my closed bedroom door, "like that" seemed to mean politics that let anyone other than straight white people matter. She even wrote a couple of op-eds in the local paper.

Within months, Mom started getting funding from big national groups with names like Ladies for Liberty and the Anti-Woke Defense League. She kept her mailing list contacts taped up in the kitchen, and when she reached fifty names, she applied to start an official chapter of Freedom Families. What an innocent-sounding name for a bunch of adults obsessed with "cleansing" schools of books that encourage such terrible things as thinking broadly about the world.

As Mom's outrage became more public, Maryam's parents became more and more wary of me. And eventually that wariness seemed to spread to Maryam. The thunderstorm of texts she used to send me daily dried up, and so did the invitations to study at her house. Instead of seeking me out between classes, she started disappearing into the river of kids flowing down the hallways. In class, she acted like a study guide on the GI Bill was more interesting than me.

On my way home from basketball practice one afternoon, after another day of unanswered texts, I decided to walk to her house and ring the doorbell. Maryam's dad answered, and all his warmth and welcome had disappeared. He stood in the doorway with his arms folded and said Maryam wasn't home.

I tried a stab at the truth. “I miss Maryam, Mr. Khan. I just want to know what’s going on.”

He hesitated. “Your mother’s last letter to the editor infuriates me. ‘Quit cutting school days for *non-American* holidays,’” he said, quoting her letter from memory. “How dare she? Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan. What would happen if I walked over to St. Ann’s and started proclaiming Easter was *non-American*?”

“I hope you know that I don’t agree with her, sir. That’s not who I am.” I knew I should meet his eyes, but the best I could do was stare past him into the front room where I’d spent so many afternoons with Maryam.

“Look at me, Cal.”

I did what he said. The bags under his eyes were a pair of prunes; I’d never seen him so tired. “That bigotry hurts.”

A week later, Maryam called me over. We sat on her front stoop; I guess I still wasn’t welcome in her house. The air was muggy, but a breeze with the last whispers of cool spring gusted down the street occasionally. In the window behind Maryam, I saw the flutter of the curtains. I was used to her parents keeping an eye on us, but now it felt more like they were keeping an eye on *me.*

Maryam got right to the point. “My parents don’t want me seeing you anymore—because of your mom,” she said.

“What? Come on. You know I’m not like my mom.”

She just kept going. “People like her think we don’t belong in our own country. Dealing with this crap isn’t new, but now they’re going after us through the school, like they need to get everyone in O-Town to join in.” She scrunched up her face and swallowed hard, like she was trying to force down the pain.

“Plus,” she continued, “you know my folks. How big they are on education. That’s why they moved us to this town in the first place. The stuff with your mom—with all her people—” She took a breath, found her strength again. “My parents aren’t just frustrated. They’re scared. I’ve never seen them like this. Dad says it’s as bad as when there was all that talk about the Muslim ban years ago, maybe even worse. People shouting at him in the parking lot outside Stop & Shop. People throwing things at our house? What's next?"

I said how sorry I was. Many times. I didn't know what else to do. My mom was part of the problem—maybe even the source of it—but she was *my mom.*

"I know it's wrong, what my mom is doing. It's so small and mean and … I hate that she is coming between us."

Maryam eyed me, not with tenderness, but with pity, like I was grasping for something that was already gone. By then, we hadn't kissed in weeks. And sitting there on those steps with her, I could feel the end in the air.

"Cal," Maryam said. "Things are changing for us. They *have* changed."

I put my hand out on the step beside her, face up. I stared hard at it, hoping I could pull some Jedi shit and make her hand float into mine, but she kept her arms wrapped so tightly around her chest she could have been wearing an invisible straitjacket.

We used to hold hands everywhere: at the library where she worked on the weekends, leaning against the brick wall outside the gym after my practices, in the halls between classes. Someone once made a joke that we were Too Tall and Too Small, but it didn't bother us because we knew we fit together.

Or so I'd thought. "I feel like you're breaking up with me."

"Cal." My name stretched when she said it, the air thin and reedy in her throat. She closed her eyes and found my hand—at least she gave me that. She squeezed. So much life.

Z, you talked about holding hands with the Redhead, blood pumping like two hearts pressed together. I felt like that with Maryam's hand in mine.

"Can we get out of here? Just for a minute? I love you, Maryam." We'd said that to each other before. And saying it right then felt like releasing a hot-air balloon from my chest. I needed her to say it too.

"I wish things were different," she said instead.

Her mom passed by the window inside. I imagined her sucking in her breath when she saw us holding hands.

I scooted to the edge of the step, shot Maryam what I hope was a winning smile. She hadn't said she was breaking up with me. She was holding my hand. But by the way she breathed in and out of her nose slowly, measured, I knew she was holding something back.

"Cal," she said, giving my hand a small squeeze, "we're moving."

"Did your parents find a place over in Brookview Villages after all?" A year or two back, her parents had talked about moving to the north side of town past the golf club, to a house zoned to the fancier suburban schools.

She shook her head. "Mom got a job in Virginia. And Dad's company is letting him work remotely. It's already settled. We leave in two weeks."

"Virginia? Two weeks?" I felt that invisible balloon pop in the air between us.

An image of Maryam in a prom dress the same saffron color as the rocker's bandanna she was wearing ran through my head—the colors of sunset in a field of tall autumn grass. I didn't want her to move away. I wanted to dance with her, kiss her when the songs slowed all the way down.

"This can't happen!" I slammed my free hand down on the step beside me so hard I felt the vibration in my butt. "They can't do this!" I knew my voice was way too loud, but it was too late. There was the curtain moving in the window again. I steadied my voice. "They can't do this to you all. To us."

"Oh, *now* you want to do something?" she said. "All these weeks, months go by, all the chances to say something to your mom, do something, and *what?* But now—" Her voice was thick with tears. "You want to do something *for once*? Stand up and speak at the school board meeting with me next week."

That scared me, and Maryam knew it.

"If you're moving, why are you even going to the meeting?"

"You know why! Or I thought you did. Books are declarations of existence. *I'm here. I matter.* You let people take away the books where I see me, you let people erase me from the shelves, you let people say my story doesn't matter. Then you're saying *I* don't matter."

"You matter, Maryam. Come on."

"No, *you* come on." Her voice was a whip clipping the air between us. "This isn't just about me. I'm not the only brown girl in this town who needs to know she matters, Cal. This is about everybody who feels threatened by your mom and the book banners trying to take away the books that matter to them most. Why am I going to the meeting? Because *someone* has to. *Someone* has to speak up against your mom and her group. It could have been you." Maryam stared at me for a moment until I looked away because I couldn't bear seeing the anger in her eyes directed at me. Then she continued. "You've read half the books your mom wants to get rid of. You know why they matter. I mean, *O-Town Blues* is on that list, Cal. You should talk about it. All you have to do is be honest. That's it. Imagine what it would mean, coming from you."

"I want to," I said, willing the words to be true. "But it's my mom."

"Yeah. It sure is. All the more reason *you* should be talking. You may not be able to get through to her, but you being there will send a message to other people."

I tried it on in my imagination, us marching into the town hall side by side to raise hell—to stand up for you, Z, and your book. But my vision faltered when I imagined Mom's face. Mom, who taught me how to track bills and expenses in a checkbook. Mom, who'd found me moping in my room a year after Dad left and dragged me out into the kitchen, cranked up some sappy U2 song, and made us dance until we laughed. She was ruining everything now, but she had been there for me then.

Even though Mom seemed to have become a Freedom Families banshee, she was still the only family I had. I didn't know how to tell Maryam that.

I didn't get a chance to say anything more because then the front door swung open.

Maryam's dad stood in the doorway, still wearing his crisp blue suit from the office. He hadn't even loosened his tie yet. He nodded at Maryam. When his brooding gaze passed over me, it said, *You're the apple that doesn't fall far from the tree.* Then he turned and disappeared into the house.

Maryam got up and walked through the front door behind him without so much as a goodbye.

This was it, I realized. The end of us.

I jumped up and called after her. “I’ll do it, Maryam. I’ll go, and I’ll say something about *O-Town.*”

Maryam turned then, and stepped back toward the threshold, the light of the house glowing around her like one of those glossy golden halos you see around people in paintings from medieval times.

“Thank you.” She said it so softly, in that tone that I knew meant that she was headed for tears. Then she stepped back inside and closed the door.

* * *

Back home, in my room, I held on to the image of Maryam in that doorway. I started making notes about parts of your book I could highlight for their inspiration and insight. Then I wrote a full draft of my speech in one sweaty, heart-pounding sitting, doing everything I could not to think of Mom in the next room. I wrote about how weird it was to try to ban an author in his hometown, how they ought to be celebrating you instead, how it was a gift for you to write with love and honesty about our city.

For the next two days, I slipped around the house on edge. I felt like there was a new me trying to break out of the cage of the old me. I could barely eat a bowl of cereal without jitter-tapping the porcelain with my spoon. I had to do something with the nervous energy, so I laced up my shoes and went for an evening run.

When I got back, the door of the house was wide open, and only the screen door was closed. It was hot for early May, and Mom had the fans blowing a cross-breeze through the house.

I leaned against the counter by the sink and drained a glass of water while I watched the corners of Mom’s papers flutter on the kitchen table. Then I recognized the book lying facedown on top of one of the piles of paper. I flipped it over and saw *O-Town Blues.* There was the hazy orange halo around the sepia-toned aerial photograph of our neighborhood. It wasn't just *a* copy of the book; it was my copy. Even without opening it to see my handwriting in the margins, I recognized it from the wear on the cover. A deep crease ran parallel to St. Ann's steeple, which pointed to the sky like a gray finger in the photo's background.

As I held the book, a sense of dread pooled within me. Mom had to be home. She never left the front door open like that. I went back to the front hall, looked up the stairs, and saw the light from my bedside lamp.

I hadn't left my light on. The stairs creaked beneath my feet as I climbed to the second floor of our house. I could feel her before I saw her.

She didn't address me when I walked into my room. She didn't even look up from her phone as she sat there, perched at the edge of my mattress with a perfectly straight back. She was texting furiously, thumbs skittering like two scared bugs across her screen. The stiff platinum bob covering her head like a helmet. I couldn't remember exactly when she'd gone bottle blond. It had arrived like the fake spring of a warm February day.

"Mom?" I said.

She didn't respond.

"Mom?" I said again. "Why are you in here?"

"Why?" she finally said, when she put the phone down. She still didn't look at me. She stared at my school laptop, flipped open on the bed beside her. The open tab was the draft of my speech.

"How could you do this to me?" Her lips pressed into a tight line, but the hurt in her eyes was raw and real.

I struggled to rekindle the fire Maryam had set in me. "I could ask you the same question. Why was my book in the kitchen, Mom? Why are you going through my computer like I'm some kind of criminal? It's …" I fumbled for words. "You're obsessed. It's freaking me out."

"You are freaking *me* out! What are you doing with this smut?"

"Smut? If you're going to take my books," I said, holding up *O-Town Blues*, "at least read them. Find out what they're really about. I dare you to read this book and then try to tell me that it's smut. It's a true story about someone's life, Mom. A love story. I guess that's something you wouldn't know about, huh?"

For a moment she looked like I'd hit her. I'd gone too far, and I knew it. But I couldn't take back what I'd said. She swung her legs off the bed and stared at me. "I know all I need to about those books," she said, her voice trembling with a cold, quiet anger. "And the people who are feeding them to you? *They* want to make you ashamed of who you are, of being from a decent, traditional American family. They want you to hate the police, they want you to put everyone else's religion first." Her fingers rose to the crucifix necklace she always wore. "I have done everything, *everything* I can, to give you something to be proud of."

"Mom, it's not like that—"

She shook her head and pushed past me. I thought that was it, but she turned in the doorway. "Someone has to fight for this family, Cal. That's what I'll keep doing. Even if that girlfriend of yours makes me out to be a monster because of it."

* * *

An icy silence settled between us in the days that followed. I passed through the kitchen like a ghost as my mom hunched over her laptop at the table. I edged past her as she leaned against the doorway to the living room texting with someone on her phone. We each made our own sandwiches, more like roommates than mother and son. I stared at the ceiling above my bed, wishing that Maryam would respond to my texts.

I was thinking about all the places where I wouldn't see Maryam anymore, where our bodies would never again slide and lock into each other like two hands cupped for warmth, when she finally did text me back.

Did you sign up for the school board meeting yet? Speaking slots are filling up fast.

My mom read my speech. She flipped out.

… You promised.

I’m just trying to figure out how I can do it without hurting the only parent I have.

Cal. Why should your love of that book—if you ever really loved it—hurt your mom?

I got on my computer and found that they’d reserved four spots for students to speak at the meeting. Maryam had the first slot. Then Rhonda, president of the Black Student Union, and Ting, president of the Queer/Straight Student Alliance, had the next two slots. There was only one slot left. I nabbed it, and I texted Maryam a screenshot of my time slot confirmation.

I’m sorry. I don’t want to be a coward.

I’m just trying to figure out how I’m going to do this.

I wish I could talk about what I’m going to say with you. I miss you.

“I miss you” was an understatement. It was like the way you say you couldn’t feel the sun on your face without feeling the Redhead’s hand on your skin. Like the endless maze of the alphabet kept leading you back to his name. I felt the same—Maryam—her name in my mouth, strong and full, like another tongue.

I just can’t stand not standing beside you.

I’m sure she knew I was quoting you, but she didn’t respond for a while. The ellipses danced until they didn’t. Later that night, she texted me back:

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

Thank you.

* * *

Say it, you told the Redhead. He whispered it in your ear. *Say it,* you told him again. *Loud. Out loud. Say it when I’m not there so only other people hear.* You asked the Redhead to do all of this, and when he didn’t, that’s when you knew it was time to leave.

I remembered this. And I wanted to say what the Redhead couldn’t. I wanted to say it *loud, out loud.* I could say it about *O-Town Blues,* and I could say it about Maryam too. At the meeting. *I love you.*

I knew from all those papers and books on our kitchen table that Mom was preparing for the school board meeting too. Mom ran O-Town’s Freedom Families chapter, but there were chapters in other cities and towns. Mom had rallied them all to show up to the meeting—the last one of the school year.

The day of the meeting, I had to squeeze through a crowd just to get to the front door of the auditorium. Then the line of police officers out front stopped me and told me the building was at capacity. I was about to turn away when a lady I recognized, probably from when I used to go to Mass with Mom, tapped the officer on the shoulder and explained that I was with her. They let us pass through.

“You here to support your mother?” she asked over her shoulder as she wove through the packed lobby, dragging me along behind her into the auditorium. I let the chaos around us bury my lack of a response. I spotted Mom up front with a huge group of Freedom Families people, but I couldn’t find Maryam. I snaked my head this way and that, looking for her everywhere.

The school board chair tapped her microphone and announced that they were about to get started, that everyone should have a seat. I hurried to sit down, sending Maryam a text as I squeezed into a nearly full row.

They were already minutes into the opening announcements when I realized that the seating in the auditorium was split like a wedding, except there wasn't a bride's and a groom's side: it was "ban books" on one side and "don't ban books" on the other, and the spot I'd grabbed was on the wrong side. Across the aisle, I spotted many of my teachers. Four girls on the leadership team of the Black Student Union had shown up to support Rhonda. And Ting was surrounded by just about every single student in the Queer/Straight Student Alliance.

I panicked, and then reminded myself that I would let the world know where I stood when I got up to the mic. That was my plan, at least. I just couldn't figure out where Maryam was. *Where are you?* I texted. I refreshed my app again and again, hoping I'd somehow missed her response.

Mom and her group presented their case first. They had a long list of books, but it was yours she attacked the most.

"These books," she yelled into the microphone, "smuggle pornography into our children's lives or are designed to make white children feel bad about themselves." She waved *O-Town Blues* in the air over her head. "The worst, like this one, do both!"

Two moms in the row behind me grumbled along in agreement. I glanced back. I knew them. Moms of guys on my basketball team. And maybe because Jeff and Vinny hadn't come to the meeting with them, their moms glanced at me with a kind of warm, Day-Glo pride. Freedom Families pride. Their smiles of solidarity unsettled me. I swung back around and stared at the stage. I tried to calm down, but anger ran through me like a grease fire.

"Pornography," Mom continued. I stopped listening as I scanned the other side of the aisle, still looking for Maryam. I knew that seeing her would help. It felt like the last minute of a tie game, and all I wanted was the ball—or the chance to take out their star player on a fast break. *Hard foul,* as Coach would say. *Hard enough to rattle him for the rest of the game.*

But all that anger was making me jumpy. My toes wouldn't stop wiggling in my sneakers. *Maryam, are you okay?* The silence on my text chain made me wonder. What if she had backed out? What if her parents had told her it was too dangerous?

And then my mom was done. It was time for students to speak. They called Maryam's name twice, and there was a long pause as the school board members whispered about something. A murmur went through the crowd across the aisle.

They called up Rhonda instead, who spoke, and then Ting. And as they spoke, all the students sitting on their side of the room held up copies of books on Mom's list: *Stamped,* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi; *Gender Queer,* by Maia Kobabe; *Flamer,* by Mike Curato; and *Internment,* by Samira Ahmed. And your book too, Z, the same book I held in my hands, my speech tucked inside it. I could have held it up. *Say it loud. Out loud. Say it when I'm not there so only other people hear.* I'm ashamed to say I didn't.

Then I heard my name called. I looked around one last time for Maryam but didn't see her. I felt a spigot creak and open, letting fear rush through me and dousing my righteous anger. When they called my name again and asked if I was present, I stared at the floor between my feet and shrank into my chair.

"These groomers and anti-American radicals want to rip families apart!"

I didn't have to look up to know that it was Mom, shouting from somewhere without a microphone. "Our children are being poisoned against us!"

People started yelling on both sides of the aisle, and the school board members tapped their microphones. Some of the police officers who'd been leaning against the walls around the room perked up and wandered into the space between the crowd and the stage. Once they gathered there in a stiff line, the room quieted.

The school board president cautioned against any further outbursts, noting that unruly attendees would be removed. The police officers crossed their arms to underline the threat.

And then I saw Maryam. She was standing by a door to the side of the platform where the school board sat. Someone raced up the steps and whispered in the ear of the school board president. She nodded, and then she called Maryam's name again.

Maryam walked to the podium clenching her paper. "A hateful incident affecting my family delayed me today. Thank you for still allowing me to speak." Her voice trembled, and it made me want to leap up and stand beside her, do anything to help ease the pain and fear so obviously coursing through her. But I'd given up my chance to do that. The cold clarity of what I'd done—what I hadn't done—cut through me.

She held the microphone with two hands, as if it might fly away from her. "I was four years old the first time I heard the word 'terrorist.' " She shifted from one foot to the other, swaying a little as if she was on a boat, not standing there, flanked by police officers, giving her speech to the board and the room. "My family was living in Boston when my mother was in graduate school, and my father and I sat on a bench overlooking the river while we waited for her shift at the library across the street to end. Two young men rode by, and I heard them say it. 'They let anyone come here now, even terrorists.' They slowed down to make sure we heard it. It wasn't the word that scared me. It was the way he said it and stared right at me. I *felt* the word 'hate' before I even knew what it meant."The room quieted, and Maryam's voice rose in volume and fullness. If her voice had carried color, the room would have glowed from the pure, iridescent gold of her words.

"Books that acknowledge that racism is real—books that affirm that the lived experience of young people in the LGBTQIA+ community deserve their full dignity and representation—books like these are not threats to anyone's education or well-being or self-esteem. We should reject the fearmongers and instead let the book *O-Town Blues* speak for itself. 'We grow when we read, and we grow even more the further we stretch from ourselves in what we read.' "

I remember the first time I heard those words in her voice. We had left Maryam's house for a walk but had come straight to my house instead because I knew Mom was on a double shift. Maryam and I were lying on my bed with our faces pressed so close our noses touched. Neither of us needed to say that this time alone was rare and special; we felt it. She reached across me and pulled *O-Town Blues* from my nightstand. After she read the quote to me, she asked, "I wonder if books are like love?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Replace the word 'read' with 'love' in that quote."

She whispered the quote again, changing the word. "We grow when we *love*, and we grow even more the further we stretch from ourselves in what we *love*."

I'd felt my body split wide open, yawning loose and out of control. "Can I kiss you?" I whispered back. Her yes was her kiss in reply.

I held that memory as I listened to Maryam wrap up her speech. I realized then, that if I'd done what I'd promised, her words would have woven with mine, the two of us connected again by your book. Maybe, when she wrote her speech, she'd still believed in me.

And I'd betrayed her.

Maryam looked directly at my mother. "We are not asking for your permission to exist. We're demanding that our education not be stunted by your strange obsession with dehumanizing us. Our humanity does not rest on whether you recognize us. We stand on our own feet." She turned back to the school board members now to deliver her final line. "But our education, the education of all the students in your district, depends on never letting bigotry govern our schools and libraries."

It was as if time had stopped altogether—the room was so quiet. But in that silence, Maryam gazed at the doorway by the stage that she had emerged from a few minutes before. Her parents hovered in the shadow beyond, but I could see them clearly enough, their faces lit with pride. And then the students' section, the one I should have been sitting in, erupted in applause. Maryam melted away from the microphone, and Ting threw her arm around her as she walked back through the side door.

Maryam disappeared from my sight. Her eyes never found mine. She didn't even look for me. I don't know if she knew I was there. It didn't matter. I felt her words rattle around in the pit of me as if we'd been alone in the room and she'd said them directly to me.

Unless you count the churning in my gut, the only "riot" that night was that noisy spell between my cowardice and Maryam's bravery. I barely heard the rest of the meeting, but I heard enough to know that Maryam and the others who stood with her were victorious. None of the challenged books were stricken from our school.

I stumbled home alone that night, as confused as if I'd been concussed.

* * *

You never said goodbye to the Redhead. *Some love stories just end,* you wrote. I know you moved on after he failed you, and eventually you found love elsewhere after you left O-Town. But did he ever write to you? Did anything he said ever make a difference, or was it too late? I wonder, does he feel the way I do now, sorry and desperate never to hurt someone else this way again?

Some love stories just end. And what follows is filled with possibility. You offer a little hope with that next line, I guess. I dream of seeing Maryam again, of winning her trust back, of her making time and space for me in her life. But I know she probably won't, and I can't blame her. I'm guessing her hope points somewhere else, and mine probably should too.

Mom and I haven't managed to find any common ground either. We don't speak. She still sits at her kitchen command center, scrolling through social media, listening to tinny clips of school board meetings in other towns, making new lists. I haven't gotten through to her. But at least now I read my books without hiding them.

I hope this letter gives you something that the Redhead never could, at least not while you lived here: proof that you matter in O-Town. Maybe the real reason I’m writing you is that I wish my words could change something, for him and you, if not for me and Maryam. I know I can’t redeem his mistakes any more than I can redeem my own. But I want to live in a world where “read” and “love” somehow rhyme, where both efforts are encouraged and possible because we are free and inspired to do so.

Admiringly yours,
Cal Ericson

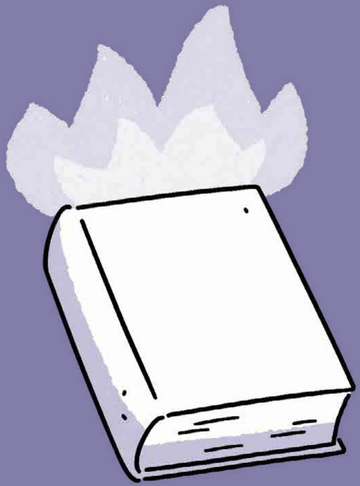
BOOKS ABOUT BANS AND CENSORSHIP

***Banned Book Club,* by Kim Hyun Sook and Ryan Estrada, illustrated by Hyung-Ju Ko.** Set in 1980s South Korea, this graphic novel tells a true story of political division, fearmongering, anti-intellectualism, and the relentless rebellion of reading.

***Burn This Book: Notes on Literature and Engagement,* edited by Toni Morrison.** Take your exploration of book bans to the next level with this powerful collection of essays that explore the meaning of censorship and the power of literature.

***Fahrenheit 451,* by Ray Bradbury.** This classic novel takes its title from the temperature where books burn. It is set in a dystopian future where reading is outlawed.

***This Book Won't Burn,* by Samira Ahmed.** When Noor moves to a new town and starts at a new high school, she discovers hundreds of books are being removed from the library to follow a new school board policy.



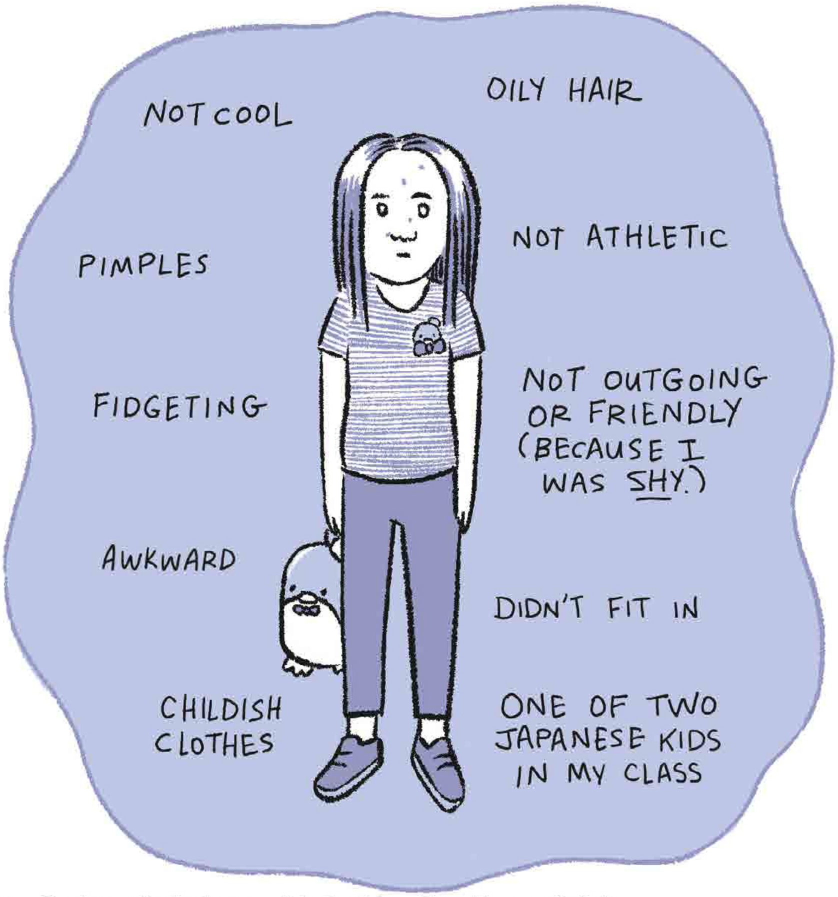
MARINAOMI

MariNaomi (they/them) is the Space Prize–winning and Eisner Award–nominated author and illustrator of *Kiss & Tell: A Romantic Résumé, Ages 0 to 22;* the Life on Earth trilogy; *Dragon's Breath: And Other True Stories; Turning Japanese;* and *I Thought You Loved Me.* Their work has appeared in *The New Yorker,* the *Washington Post,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and other publications. They are the founder and administrator of the Cartoonists of Color Database, the Queer Cartoonists Database, and the Disabled Cartoonists Database.

MATURE THEMES

BY MARINAOMI

I was a lonely eleven-year-old.


NOT COOL
OILY HAIR
PIMPLES
NOT ATHLETIC
FIDGETING
NOT OUTGOING OR FRIENDLY (BECAUSE I WAS SHY.)
AWKWARD
DIDN'T FIT IN
CHILDISH CLOTHES
ONE OF TWO JAPANESE KIDS IN MY CLASS

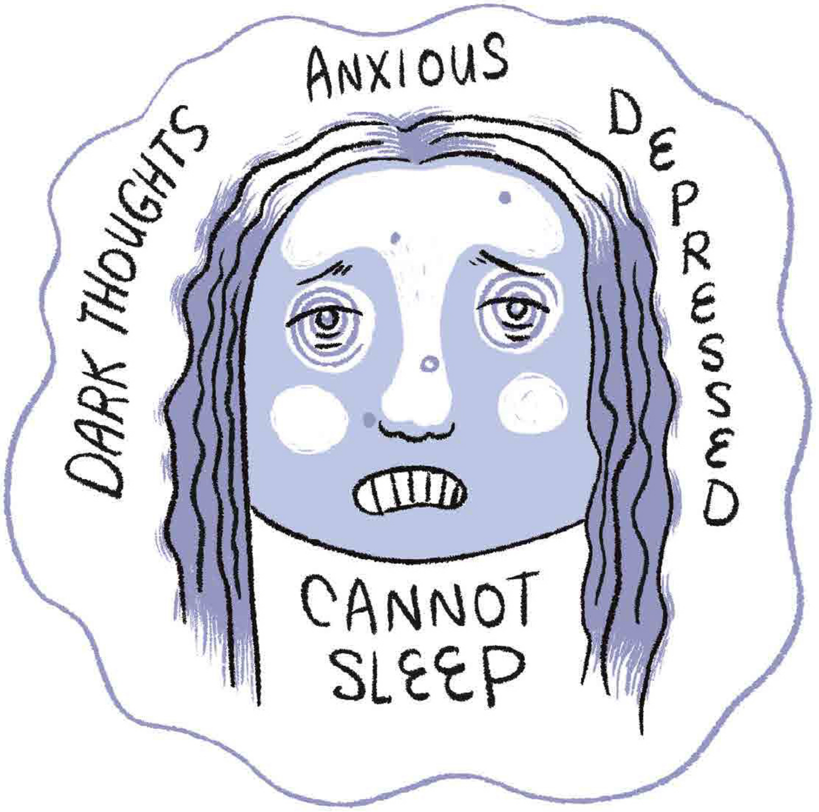
My friendships didn't feel solid.
My family life was turbulent.
My grades at school were dipping.

I didn't feel like anyone understood me. In turn, I had a hard time understanding my peers.

I looked like a kid, I was treated like a kid, but I didn't feel carefree like people said kids should feel.

To make things worse, changes happening in my body (aka puberty) were affecting my mental health. The weight of the world, and all its problems, felt enormous.

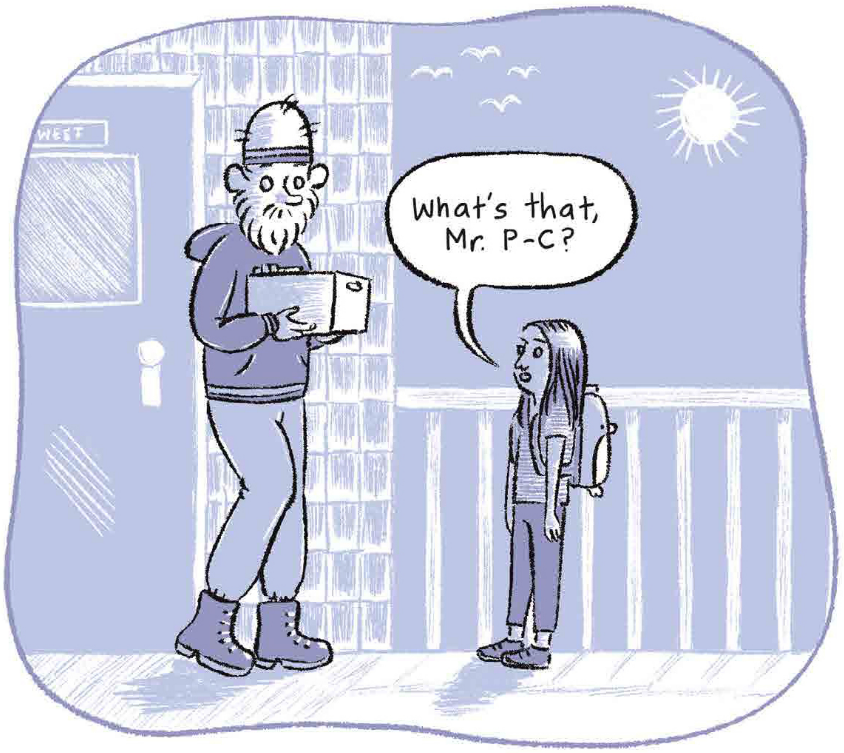
I was in **HORMONAL HELL.**

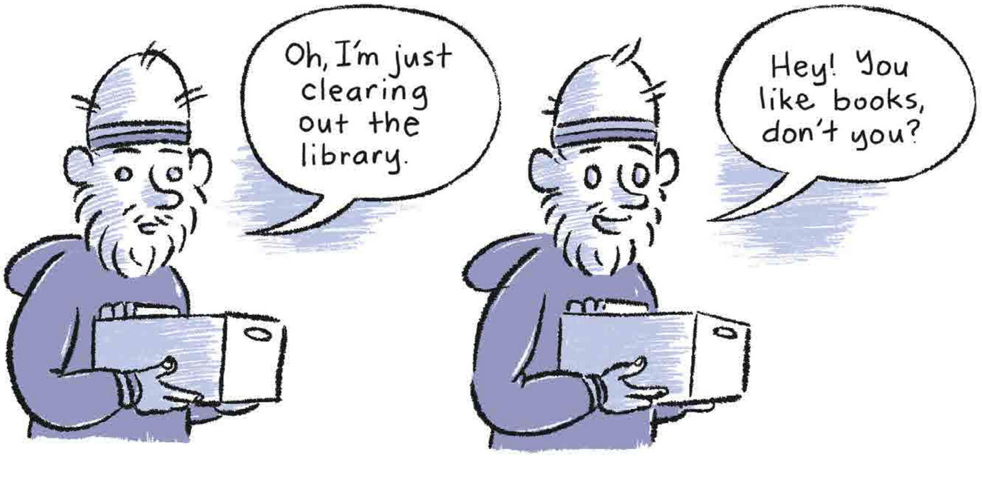

ANXIOUS
DARK THOUGHTS
DEPRESSED
CANNOT SLEEP

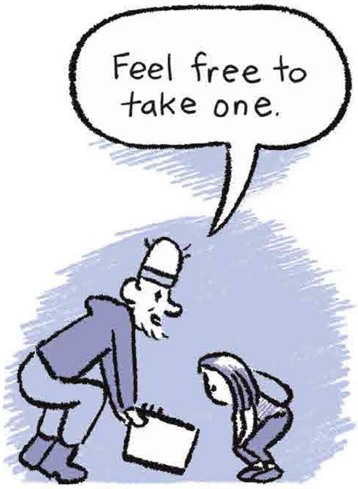
I felt weird, unlovable, crazy, and alone.

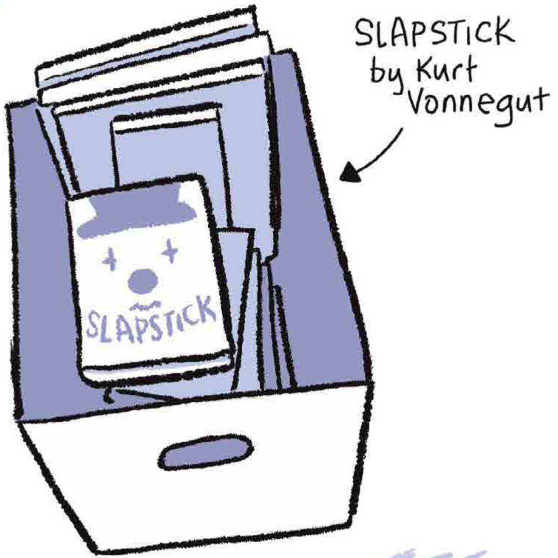
But then something happened. Something that changed everything.

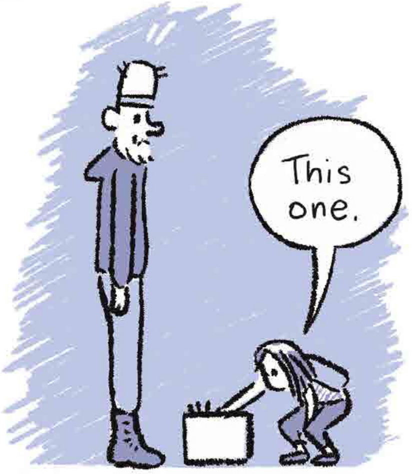
One day, I noticed my English teacher,
Mr. Palmer-Collins, carrying something.

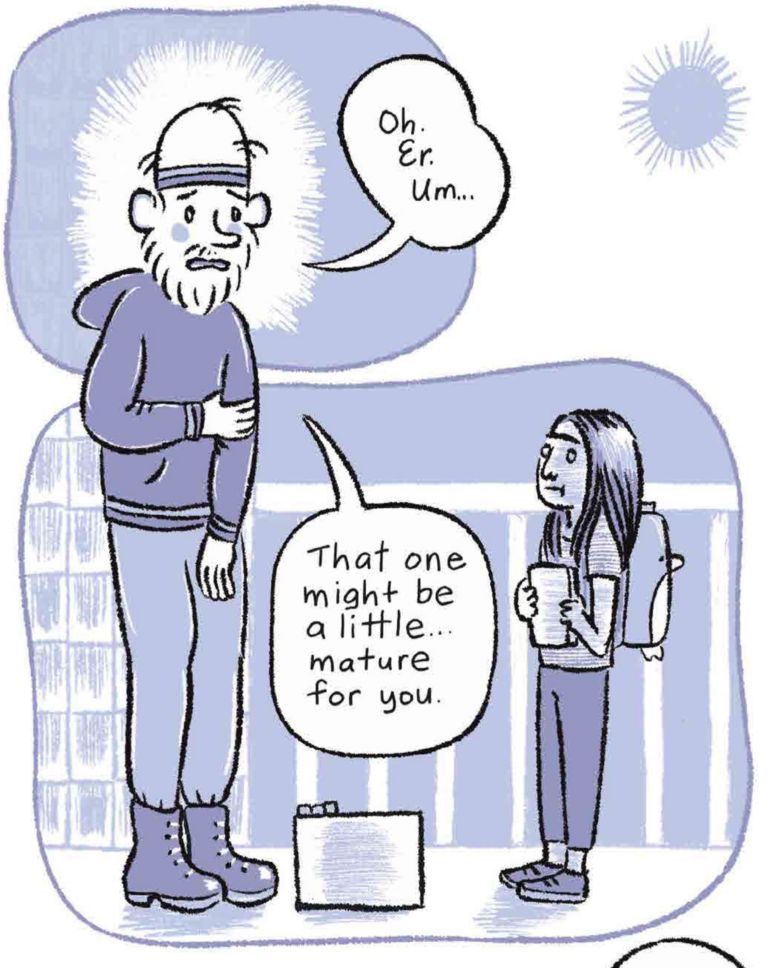

WEST
What's that, Mr. P-C?

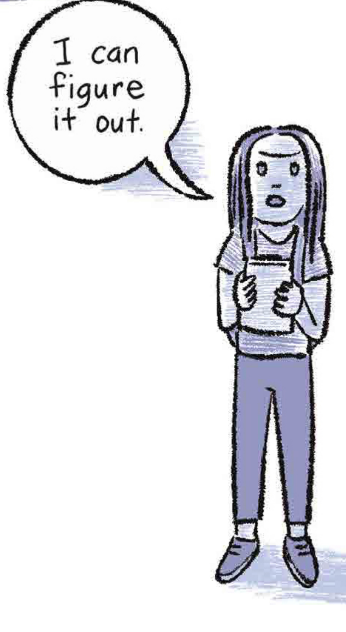

Oh, I'm just clearing out the library.
Hey! You like books, don't you?

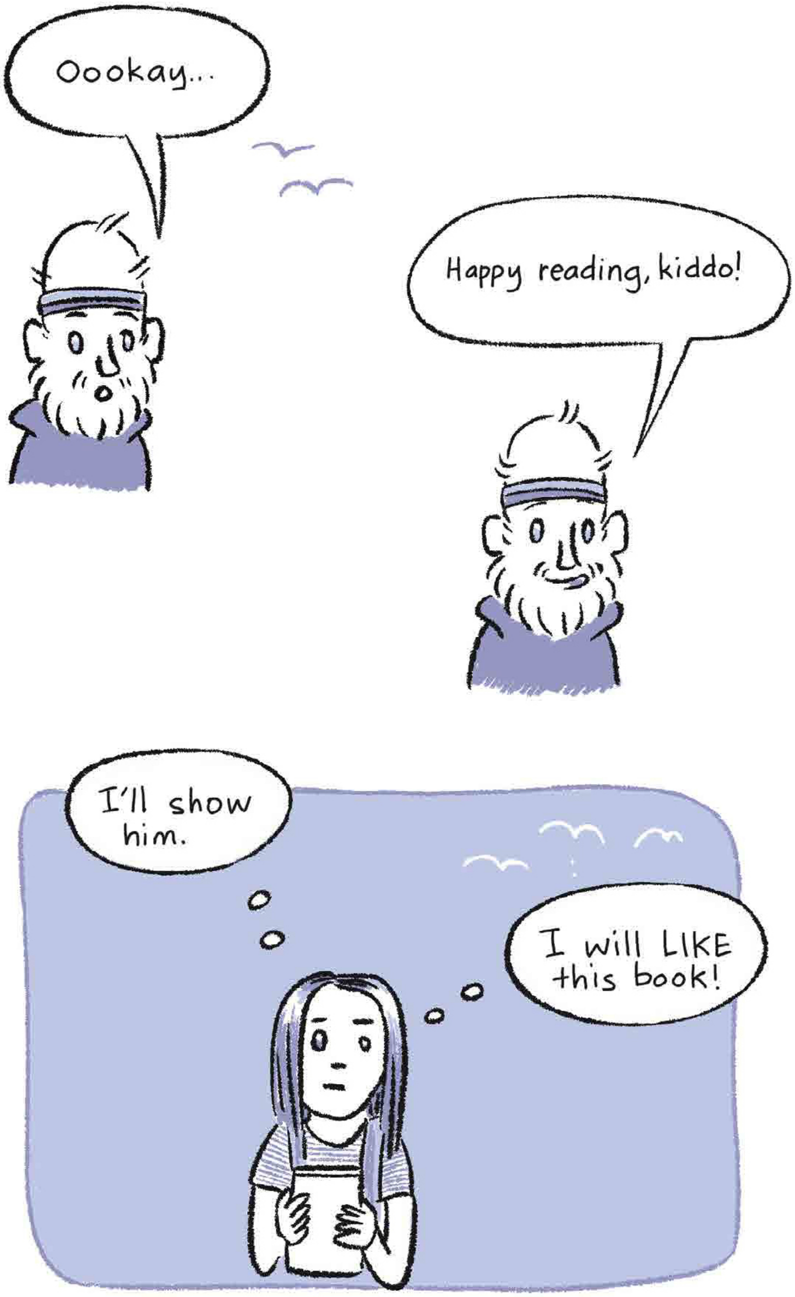

Feel free to take one.


SLAPSTICK by Kurt Vonnegut
SLAPSTICK


This one.

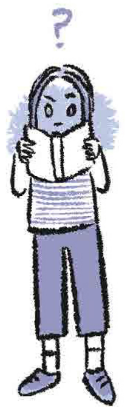

Oh. Er. Um...
That one might be a little... mature for you.

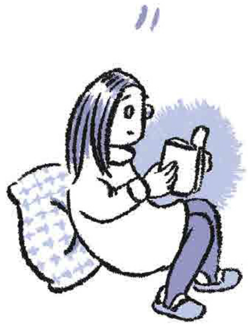

I can figure it out.

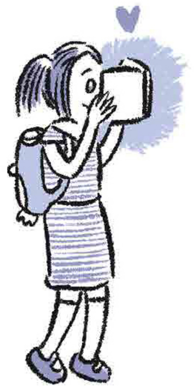

Oookay...
Happy reading, kiddo!
I'll show him.
I will LIKE this book!

Turns out I more-than-liked the book.

I'd never encountered a voice like Vonnegut's before. He was affected by the dark parts of the world just like I was, but he was also imaginative and FUNNY. Also, he KNEW things. But he didn't make me feel stupid, even though I wasn't at his level yet.





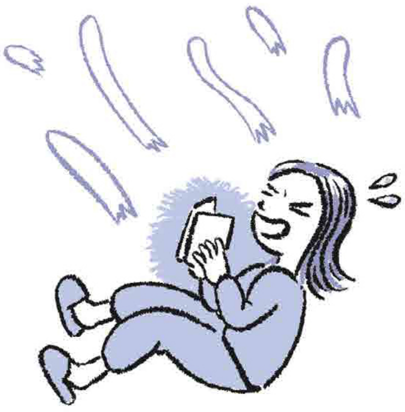


His book lifted me up and BROUGHT me to his level, showing me how to laugh with him at things I didn't know how to deal with yet:

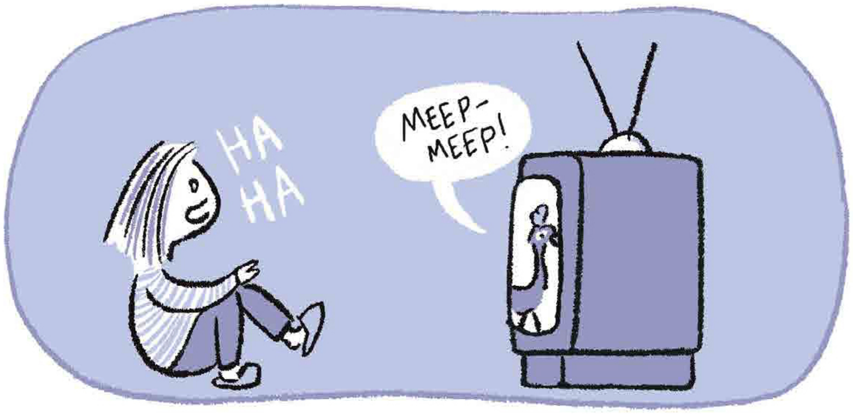
CRUELTY FEAR DARKNESS

He showed me how to brace myself against the bad stuff by reframing it as ridiculous.

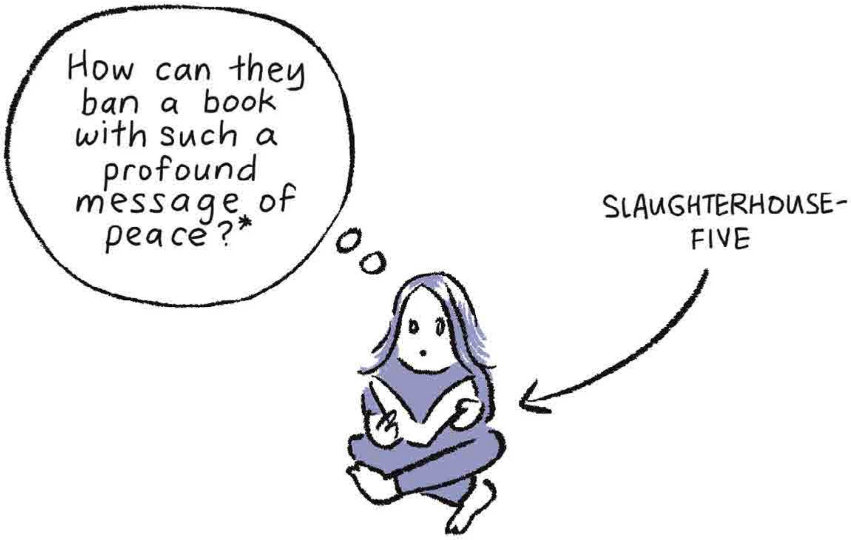
It was exactly what I needed.



SLAPSTICK contained "mature themes." Those themes didn't poison my mind or make me want to imitate the things the characters in the book did—no more than a cartoon coyote would inspire me to chase a roadrunner off a cliff.


HA HA
MEEP-MEEP!

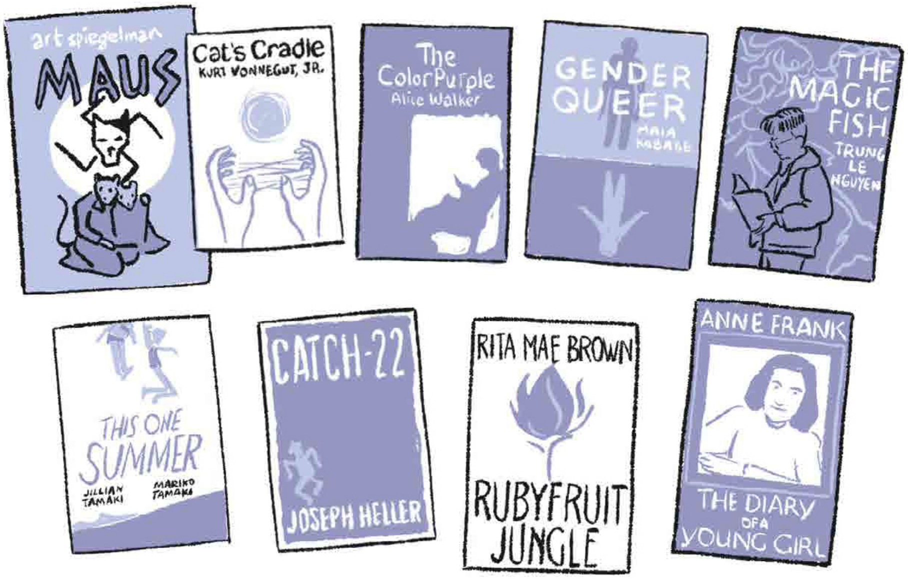
I loved it so much, I sought out more books written by Vonnegut. That's when I learned that many of his books had been banned.


How can they ban a book with such a profound message of peace?*
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

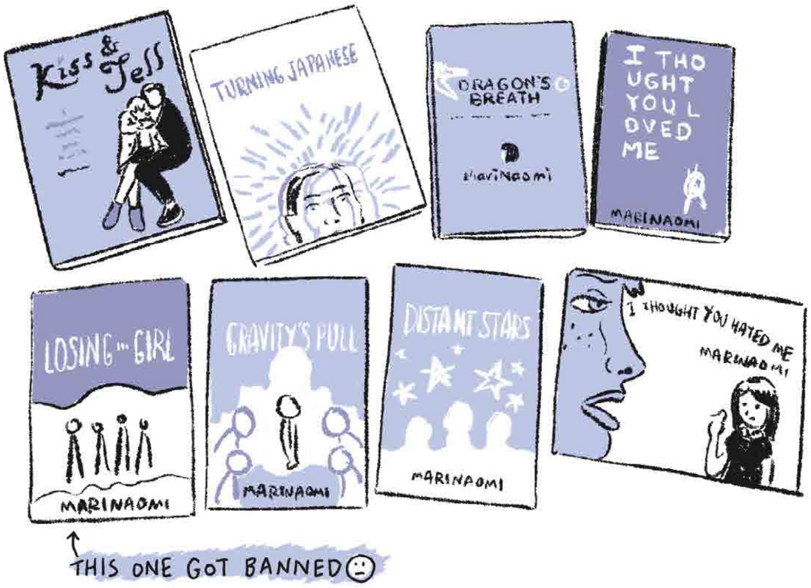
* Antiwar messaging was probably the real reason his books were so widely banned.

I started to get the feeling that banned books might have more interesting things to say than the average non-banned book.

Here are some of my favorite banned books:


art spiegelman
MAUS
Cat's Cradle
KURT VONNEGUT, JR.
The Color Purple
Alice Walker
GENDER QUEER
MAIA KOBABE
THE MAGIC FISH
TRUNG LE NGUYEN
THIS ONE SUMMER
JILLIAN TAMAKI
MARIKO TAMAKI
CATCH-22
JOSEPH HELLER
RITA MAE BROWN
RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE
ANNE FRANK
THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL

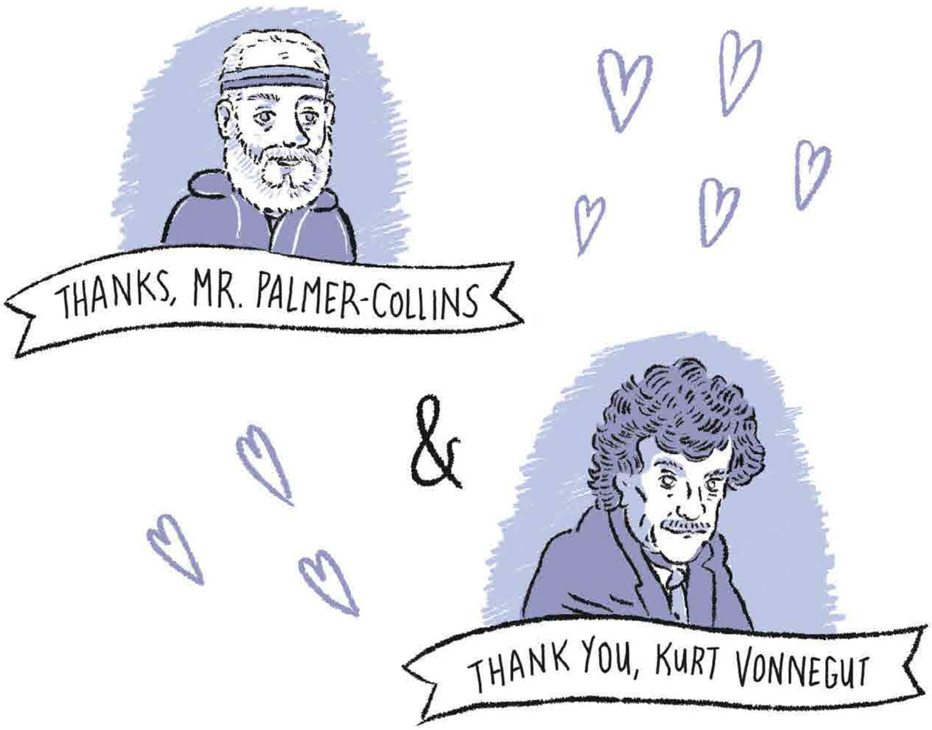
I eventually became an author, just like my hero. Here are some of my books:


Kiss & Tell
TURNING JAPANESE
DRAGON'S BREATH
MariNaomi
I THOUGHT YOU LOVED ME
MARINAOMI
LOSING THE GIRL
MARINAOMI
GRAVITY'S PULL
MARINAOMI
DISTANT STARS
MARINAOMI
I THOUGHT YOU HATED ME
MARINAOMI
THIS ONE GOT BANNED ☹

By trusting me with a book with mature themes, my teacher changed, and perhaps saved, my life.

This experience instilled in me a lifelong love of literature, and a desire to help people in the same way that Mr. Vonnegut had helped me.

If Mr. P-C hadn't given me this book, I wonder if I'd be an author today. Would I even be alive? I'm grateful I don't have to find out.


THANKS, MR. PALMER-COLLINS
&
THANK YOU, KURT VONNEGUT

Love, MariNaomi 2024

RIDICULOUS REASONS BOOKS HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED OR BANNED

TITLE CONFUSION

***Between Shades of Gray,* by Ruta Sepetys.** *Between Shades of Gray* is a young adult historical novel about a teen who is arrested by the Soviet secret police and deported to Siberia with her mother and younger brother in the 1940s. Published in March of 2011, *Between Shades of Gray* won awards and glowing reviews. It also quickly became the target of misinformed challenges because of another book with a similar title: the erotic *adult* novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (not in school libraries!).

And for the record, Sepetys had no way to anticipate this confusion. Her book was published first.

THE AUTHOR'S LAST NAME WAS … "GAY"

***Read Me a Story, Stella,* by Marie-Louise Gay.** In 2023, Alabama's Huntsville-Madison County Public Library system added this children's book to a list of "potentially sexually explicit" books to be reviewed and possibly moved out of the children's sections in its ten branches. It's sad—and telling—that the word "gay" was a keyword that triggered the assumption that something was sexually explicit.

DISCOMFORT WITH SCIENCE AND THE DIVERSITY OF THE ANIMAL WORLD

***And Tango Makes Three,* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson.** This cute children's book tells the factual story of two male penguins who paired in the Central Park Zoo, successfully hatched an egg together, and raised the chick (Tango). Book banners who see it as "LGBTQ indoctrination" miss the fact that this *true story* simply illustrates the diversity of mating behavior throughout the animal world.

***Sea Horse: The Shyest Fish in the Sea,* by Chris Butterworth and John Lawrence.** Seahorses are the only fish species in which the male becomes pregnant and gives birth—cool, right? Apparently not to Moms 4 Liberty in Williamson County, Tennessee. This group complained in June 2021 that for kids to learn the science of seahorses in this picture book equals "social conditioning … attempting to normalize that males can get pregnant." The thing is … male seahorses *do* get pregnant. It's a fact.

***Queer Ducks (and Other Animals): The Natural World of Animal Sexuality,* by Eliot Schrefer.** In this fun science book for teens, each chapter is structured around a different animal and is accompanied by a one-page comic. Schrefer wanted his book to highlight the playful side of science, to expand ideas about who gets to do science, and to show the factual basis for the variety of approaches to sex in the animal world. In typical fashion, book banners objected because *Queer Ducks* opens minds to diversity they want to reject.

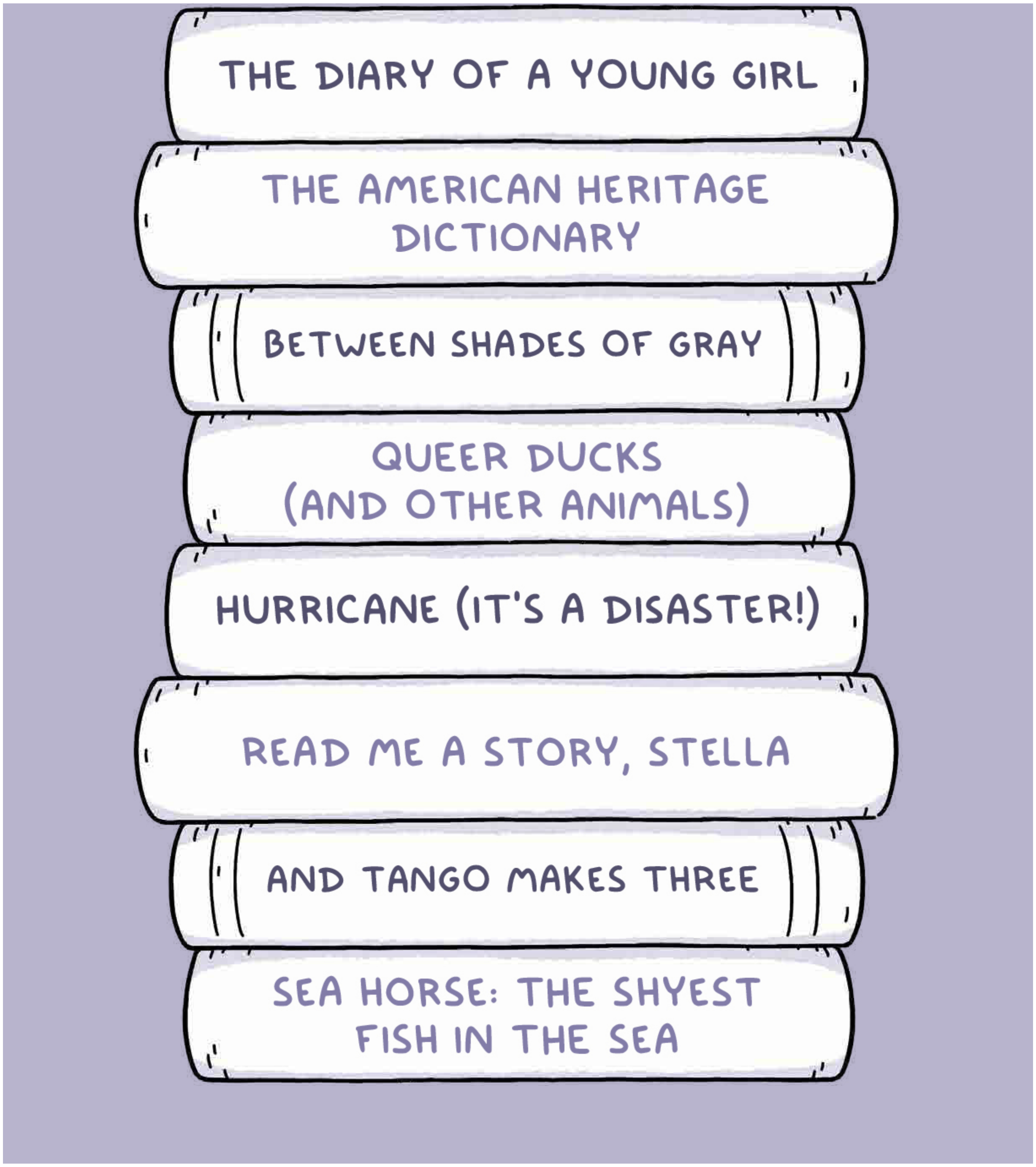
FOR BEING A "DOWNER"

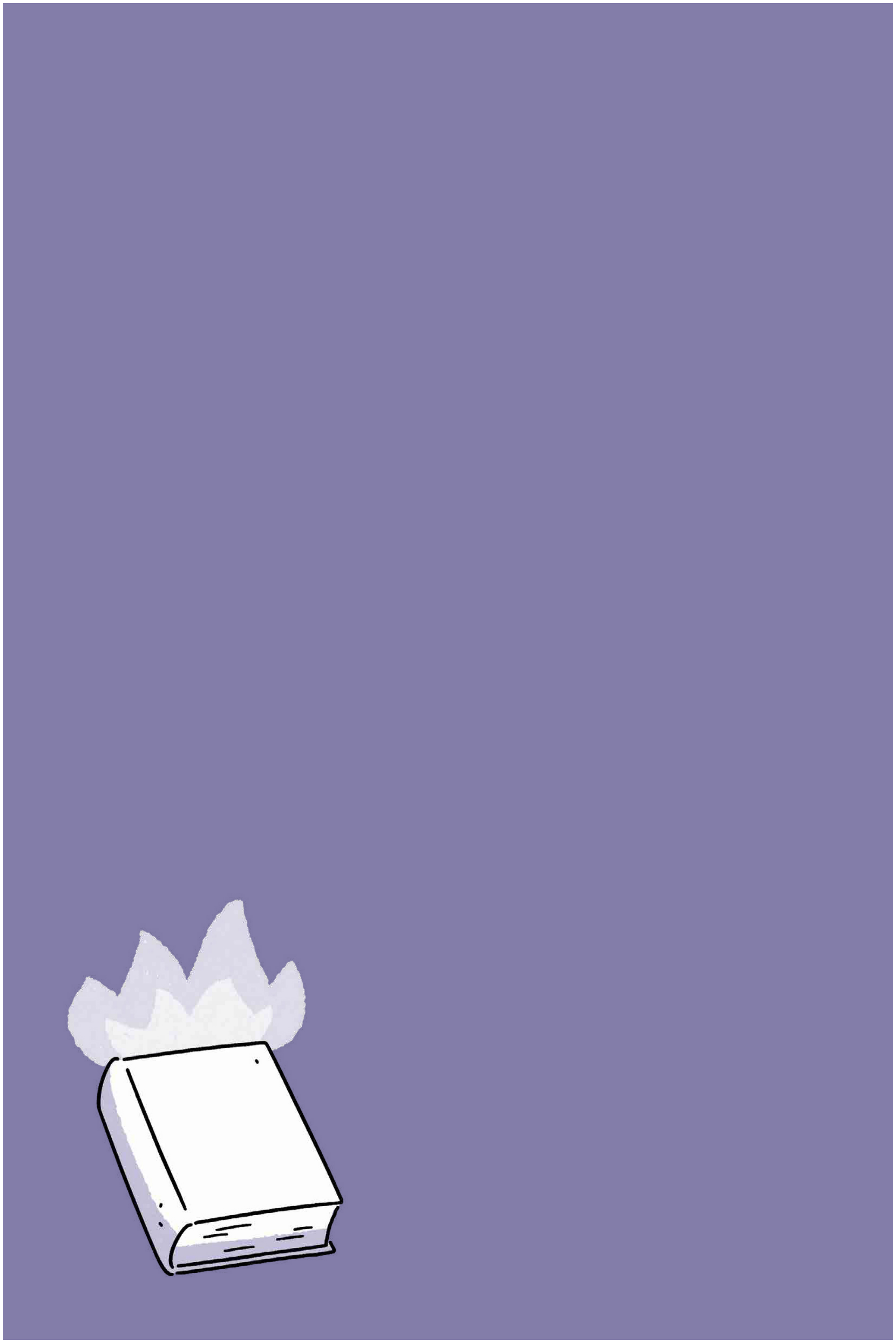
***The Diary of a Young Girl,* by Anne Frank.** At one point in the 1980s, four members of the Alabama State Textbook Committee rejected Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl,* the classic journal kept by a Jewish teen who ultimately died in a concentration camp. The diary has long been understood as an essential window onto the Holocaust. In rejecting the book, one member of the committee asserted, "It's a real downer." Isn't it appropriate for a book documenting an experience connected to the genocide of millions of people to prompt reflection and sadness?

***Hurricane (It's a Disaster!),* by Jessica Rudolph.** This is your classic forces of nature elementary school library book—hurricanes, how they form, the impact they have, and what happens after. But Moms 4 Liberty in Williamson County, Tennessee, believed that "pictures of hurricane devastation to homes" would be harmful, and "first grade is too young to hear about possible devastating effects of hurricanes."

FOR BEING A DICTIONARY

The American Heritage Dictionary. This dictionary has been banned in different places over the years for including slang that some find offensive, like "bed," "knocker," and "balls." One district in Florida is reviving the trend, removing dictionaries and encyclopedias to review them for possibly explicit portrayals of "sexual conduct."


THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL
THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY
BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY
QUEER DUCKS (AND OTHER ANIMALS)
HURRICANE (IT'S A DISASTER!)
READ ME A STORY, STELLA
AND TANGO MAKES THREE
SEA HORSE: THE SHYEST FISH IN THE SEA



TRACI SORELL

Bestselling author Traci Sorell writes inclusive, award-winning historical and contemporary fiction and nonfiction in a variety of formats for young people. She is a Cherokee Nation citizen as well as a two-time Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal and Orbis Pictus Award honoree. Eight of her books have received awards from the American Indian Library Association. Many of her works have been challenged or banned in the United States. Her focus on providing engaging works for inquisitive young people remains undaunted. Visit her website at www.tracisorell.com.

READ BANNED BOOKS: AN ACROSTIC POEM

BY TRACI SORELL

Realize adults who ban books want to
Erase the people, history, sovereignty,
And present-day reality of Native Nations.
Don't be taken in.

Borrow or buy books by Native creators
At your school, public library, or local bookstore.
Never forget you have the right to know what
Native people contribute,
Excel in, overcome, and
Dream into being, now and in the past.

Bring your generation's voice forward.
Organize against challenges and bans
Of books written for you and your peers.
Keep our shared humanity as a focus to
Secure access to books for everyone—always.

A Message from Traci

Think about everything you've been taught about Native people since kindergarten. Jot down what you know about Native Nations and their citizens beyond Columbus arriving in the Caribbean, the First Thanksgiving myth, and the forced removal of many Native Nations from their homelands.

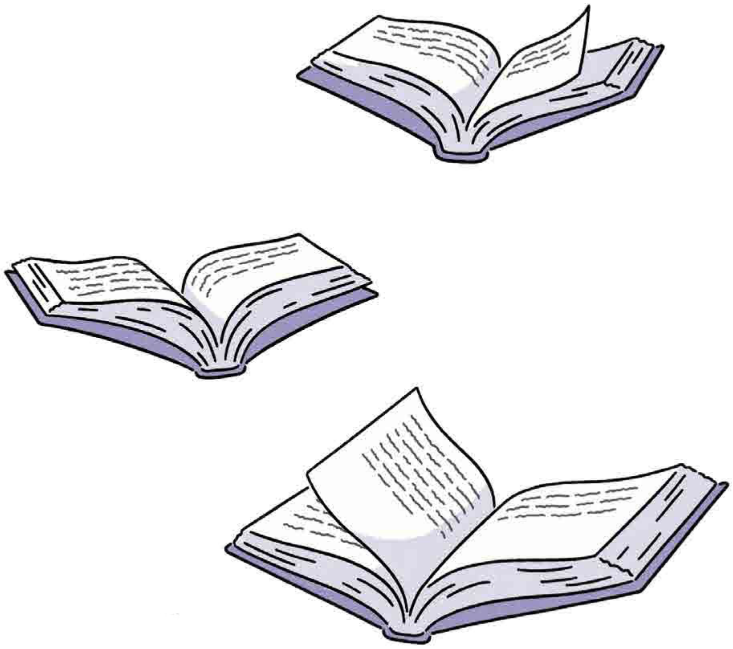
Does your list include studying the unique legal and political status of Native Nations and their citizens? That the sovereignty of Native Nations predates the creation of the recently formed United States of America by tens of thousands of years? Recognition of that sovereignty by various European countries and later the USA by signing legally binding agreements known as treaties (still in force today)? How different civil and criminal laws apply to citizens of Native Nations that do not apply to others living in this country? The innumerable contributions, both historic and current, of Native Nations and their citizens to the world?

Within your literature courses and school library visits, do you recall having Native-authored and/or Native-illustrated books, poems, or short stories featured? Jot down a few titles and creators if you remember them.

There are so many rich, amazing, heartbreaking, and inspiring things to know about Native peoples, but the people who ban and challenge books by Native creators want to keep that information from you. The less you know, the less likely you are to question our history and dig for truth.

The growing body of Native-created fiction and nonfiction works for children and teens over the past decade centers the past, present, and future of Native peoples of all ages, identities, and intersections. Teachers, librarians, and families seek out these books to fill gaps found in classroom teaching, where Native Nations and their citizens usually disappear by 1900, if they are included at all.

Those who center willful ignorance instead of our collective humanity are on the wrong path. You, your peers, and all readers deserve access to the spectrum of entertaining, informative, and inspiring works now available.



FIGHT THE ERASURE OF NATIVE PEOPLES FROM LITERATURE AND HISTORY

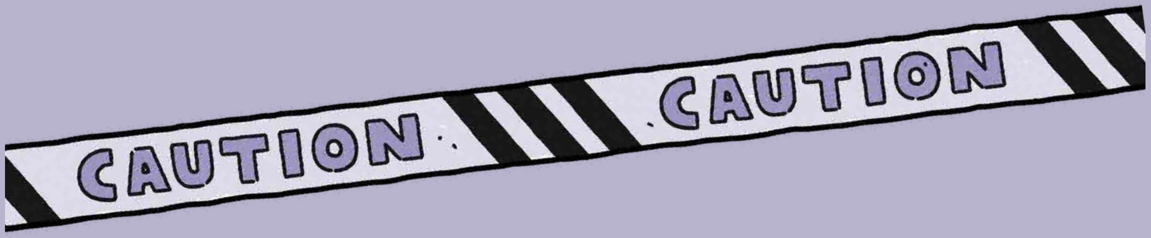
Bans targeting books about Native Nations are especially harmful to an honest and complete understanding of the land we live on and the people who have always been here. Why?

1. **Books by and about Native peoples are underrepresented** in library collections to begin with.

2. **Histories, facts, and present realities for Native Nations** are infrequently or inaccurately taught in most US schools. Some of the important topics erased by book bans include the mass genocide of Native peoples across the continent, land theft, broken treaties, and the horrors of Native young people forced to attend boarding schools—growing up isolated from family, language, culture, and community.

3. **Banning threatens students' ability to learn about** sovereign Native Nations, their rights to land, and the contributions they make to all aspects of US life, from science, culture, and language to agriculture, cuisine, and inventions.

What can you do? Celebrate the talents of Native writers and seek accurate treatments of history. Here are just a few of the many Native-created books that may change how you see the world.



We refer to Native peoples and Native Nations here, but you'll notice other terms in the book titles below, including "Indigenous People," "Indians," and "Native American." What gives? Because "Indian" has its origins in Christopher Columbus's mistaken belief that he had landed on the Indian subcontinent, many feel it is inaccurate, and some find it offensive. The most accurate way to refer to Native communities is with the names that they call themselves, such as the Penobscot Nation and Tohono O'odham Nation.

Not sure what to say in a specific case or with a particular person? Make a respectful request for guidance. Be open to hearing that you need to get your information another way. Native people don't always have the time or energy to answer these questions, and it is definitely *not* their job. But in most cases, folks will appreciate that you are checking and showing consideration of their communities.

CAUTION
CAUTION

Nonfiction

Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, by Monique Gray Smith, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and illustrator Nicole Neidhardt

Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale

Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask: Young Readers Edition, by Anton Treuer

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz with Debbie Reese and Jean Mendoza

Notable Native People: 50 Indigenous Leaders, Dreamers, and Changemakers from Past and Present, by Adrienne Keene and illustrator Ciara Sana

#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale

Soldiers Unknown, by Chag Lowry and Rahsan Ekedal (graphic novel)

Fiction

Hearts Unbroken, by Cynthia Leitich Smith

Firekeeper's Daughter and *Warrior Girl Unearthed,* by Angeline Boulley

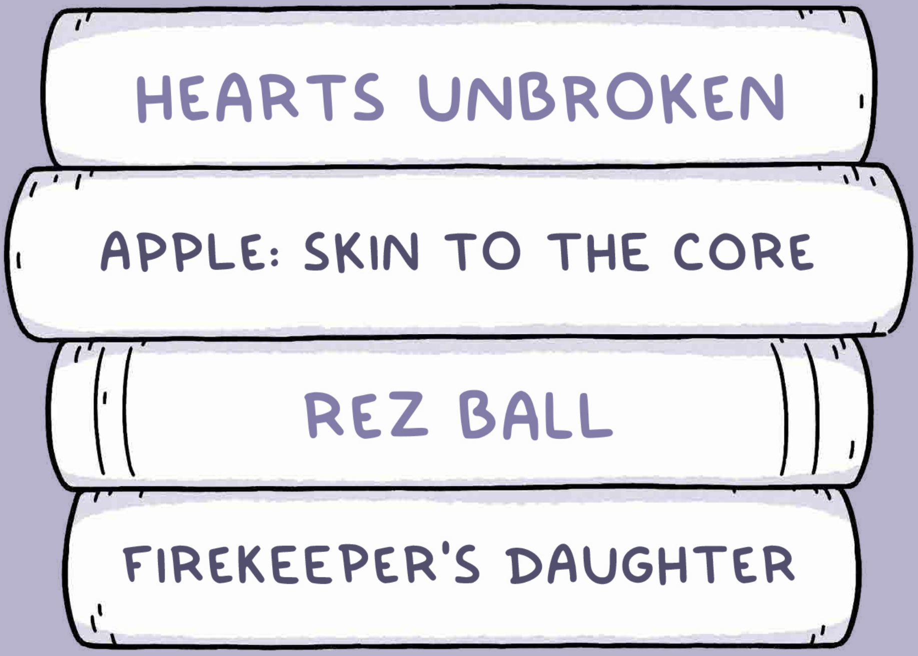
If I Ever Get Out of Here, Give Me Some Truth and *Apple: Skin to the Core,* by Eric Gansworth

Man Made Monsters, by Andrea Rogers and illustrator Jeff Edwards

The Marrow Thieves and *Hunting by Stars,* by Cherie Dimaline
Rez Ball, by Byron Graves
This Place: 150 Years Retold, by Kateri Akiwenzie Damm and others

Poetry

Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers, by Jake Skeets
Living Nations, Living Words: An Anthology of First Peoples Poetry, edited by Joy Harjo
She Speaks Poetry, by Edyka Chilomé


HEARTS UNBROKEN
APPLE: SKIN TO THE CORE
REZ BALL
FIREKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

ISABEL QUINTERO

Isabel Quintero is an award-winning writer from the Inland Empire who's been told to bite her tongue and has been getting in trouble for not doing it since she was a teenager. Her works include *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces; Ugly Cat and Pablo* and *Ugly Cat and Pablo and the Missing Brother; Photographic: The Life of Graciela Iturbide; My Papi Has a Motorcycle; Mamá's Panza;* and several anthologies, including *Ab(solutely) Normal: Short Stories that Smash Mental Health Stereotypes,* edited by Nora Shalaway Carpenter and Rocky Callen.

THE ART OF THE HOCICONA

BY ISABEL QUINTERO

“If words are our weapons, we must ask ourselves, why should we use rocks and sticks when we have tanks available?”
—Gabi Hernandez, in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*

The first banned book in what is now the United States was by a man named Thomas Morton, who liked to dance, wanted to live amicably with Native folks, and even sold them guns. The year was 1637. The book was called *New English Canaan.* In it, Morton criticized Puritan customs. For this, he was eventually exiled.

This proves a few things.

1. Puritans really hated fun.
2. There have always been people speaking up for themselves, and there have always been people who wanted to keep them quiet.
3. Book banning is as American as book banning.

1.

I am fifteen and my mom has followed me through the kitchen and into the bathroom and we’re yelling all the way. If I remember correctly, and I may be wrong because memory is a fickle thing, I have just gotten yelled at—again—for the thing I am yelled at throughout my childhood: talking back. In this case it's because I told her I shouldn't have to throw the trash away in addition to my other chores, when my brother didn't have to do anything. My mom says, "Te van a venir dando unos por hocicona." She's afraid that my loud mouth, my hocicona-ness, will get me a fist to the face.

I got close to real fistfights a few times, most recently when I was twenty (the situation was ridiculous, as many things are when you're twenty). But it was twenty-five years before the fist my mom imagined came for my big mouth.

Not a physical fist, mind you.

This is the fist of censorship, of book banning. Book banning is a form of violence. Just like taking someone's language, cutting hair, forbidding dances, and erasing cultures, book banning is a violence that finds support in state governments and other authorities, like school boards. Banning seeks to constrain critical thought and community, to destroy connection and punish mutual recognition and empathy.

Book banning attempts to keep people ignorant; it is the violence of manipulation and denial of access. Books make it possible for us to confront ideas that confuse us or that are different from our own or that make us uncomfortable about each other. Books help us grow perspective and learn to live together on this planet in less harmful ways, for the short time we get to live on it. Book banning refuses these possibilities and instead makes cowardly appeals to fear and insecurity. It creates monsters out of the unknown and insults the intellect of readers everywhere. Book banning says, "You don't know how to think for yourself when you encounter books about X, so we will make sure you don't encounter them."

Book banners are afraid of having to think for themselves, of having to speak to their children on subjects they don't know anything about. Book banners are afraid of having their comfort challenged, or of having to examine their values, beliefs, behavior, and (sometimes) faith. Book banners are chickenshit.

Hociconas like me see chickenshit for chickenshit, and we say so. We are forever at odds with book banners (or anyone trying to tell us what to think or how to behave or when to shut up).

* * *

The word "hocicona" fascinates me because it casts girls and women who speak up for themselves as unruly, disrespectful, and rude. The point of the expression, which means "big mouth," is to discredit us.

Hociconas are feared and vilified because they like rocking boats

and stirring pots
they like lighting matches and pouring gas
but they *love* stoking flames.

Hociconas are not holy because when holy water hits them

they howl and bray
they bark and hiss
they turn to vapor
but don't disappear
instead they become ghosts who won't let cowards sleep.

"Witch," "bruja," "necia," "bitch," "slut," "ghetto," and "attention seeker" are all other words for "hocicona."

In my life, I've most often been called an hocicona for not following "the rules." Those rules often boiled down to just one: "Calladita te vez mas bonita." Which roughly translates to, "You're prettier when you're silent." What I learned at fifteen is still true for me today: I don't need to be pretty; I need to be heard.

2.

My mouth is a constant cause for concern during my adolescence. My mom, despite being a fighter herself, doesn't want an hocicona for a daughter. Hociconas, like her, bring attention to themselves. In a bad way. In a way that brings shame to the family. In a way that could get someone killed. She wants to protect teen me from what can come to an hocicona. Maybe she really thinks that if she keeps me inside, if I do good in school, if I wear dresses and makeup and do my hair, if my words are soft and kind and polite, I will be safe. Maybe she just wishes for it to be true.

3.

I am twelve, and some Southern Californian conservatives manage to convince a large majority of California, at least those eligible to vote, that immigrants are a problem. Immigrants are taking jobs and resources. Immigrants do not deserve access to medical care or public schooling. Immigrants are a drain on the economy who must be stopped and deported.

According to these right-wing politicians, the country is under an alien invasion. It is a war on the American way. A surge of brown people coming to take everything from everyone. They have to be stopped. They must be stopped.

Politicians like California governor Pete Wilson cash in on people's fears.

Democratic president Bill Clinton signs the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which takes effect in 1994. NAFTA destabilizes Latin American countries, decimates agriculture and commerce, and forces people to leave their home countries in droves.

Clinton, following in the footsteps of his anti-immigrant forefathers who'd passed things like the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798, the Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924), and Operation Wetback in 1954, among many others, finds a brutal solution to the problem that his own administration has created: Operation Gatekeeper. This accelerates the militarization of the US border. Increased border patrol at the edge of

Mexico forces desperate migrants to cross through—and often die in—the Sonoran Desert. This cruel policy ultimately leads to thousands and thousands of migrant deaths—deaths that the administration *anticipated and intended.*

The Sonoran Desert is hundreds of miles away from my school in Corona, California, but the migrants dying of thirst there are not the only immigrants that many Californians have decided to fear and hate.

My parents are immigrants and their friends are immigrants and my neighborhood is immigrants and some of my classmates are immigrants and we are all on edge.

A month after Operation Gatekeeper is set in motion in 1994, Proposition 187, a racist and xenophobic piece of legislation, is put on the general election ballot in California. This measure prohibits undocumented immigrants from accessing public services, like medical care and public education. It is the dream child of Robert Kiley, his wife, Barbara Kiley (the mayor of Yorba Linda), and a few of their friends who dislike "illegal immigrants." They write newsletters vilifying immigrants and denouncing their "stench of urination, defecation, narcotics, savagery and death."

Prop 187 passes.

4.

I am twelve, and in English class I get told by Courtney S. that I shouldn't be here. That I shouldn't even be in school because I am taking away resources from her and other real American kids, and my parents are taking jobs from real Americans like her parents. I get it easy because I'm light-skinned. Besides being called a wetback here and there, plus weathering Courtney's ignorance, I'm mostly left alone. But not in a way that feels good.

I am an acceptable shade of Mexican and that means that people feel safe making jokes around me—jokes they shouldn't make at all. Jokes they think don't apply to me because they don't think I am dark enough to be offended. My darker classmates aren’t so lucky. Brown kids get harassed in hallways and classrooms, even during PE. Courtney turns her spite on a girl named Lupita so much that one day, in the locker room as we get into our PE clothes, Lupita loses it and screams at her. Courtney cries; Lupita gets in trouble. A tale as old as time. The adults in the school do nothing to stop the Courtneys because racism isn’t real (or so we’re told). They act as if these brown kids are just too sensitive or maybe their parents’ English isn’t good enough to understand or to speak up for them.

5.

I am twelve and having a sleepover with Tonya M. Tonya and I are best friends, and I spend a lot of time at her big big house with the big big pool and the big big yard. I use it as an escape from all the dysfunction in my home. She has sisters and lives with her grandparents. Her grandfather is nice but her nana is not.

Tonya and I are eating ice cream in the kitchen when Nana walks in with dark lip liner and lipstick and heavy eyeliner.

“Look! I’m a Mexican!” she laughs. I don’t, but I know what she’s trying to do. She’s modeling herself on the girls at school my mom warns me about. The ones who came into their hocicona power much sooner than I did. The ones I admire and fear at the same time. The ones who couldn’t care less about me.

I’m caught by surprise, and the situation overwhelms me so completely that I do not register whatever happens next. Tonya must’ve said something, because Nana’s smile is replaced with disgust. As if she is the one who should be offended. She rolls her eyes, and quickly makes her exit.

“It was just a joke” are her parting words.

I sit at the table, holding back tears, my stomach churning. I force spoonful after spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. Whatever it takes to silence the hocicona in me. The hocicona that is raging. The hocicona that wants to call this pendeja by her name. The hocicona that wants to throw the rest of her ice cream in the ugly old woman's face. Instead, I keep my words to myself and I swallow my shame. I know I could call my mom, and I want to, but I can't stand the thought of admitting why I need her to pick me up in the middle of the night. Ever since I've known Tonya, when my mom drops me off at her house, she warns me that it is just a matter of time before Tonya's family shows what they're really like, as if she knows something I don't. I don't want a lesson from her. I just want to go home.

6.

I am twelve, almost thirteen, and there is a buzz in my junior high. The word "walkout" has been whispered for the last day or two. It's not just my school; later, I'll learn that over ten thousand students from all over Southern California will join in organized walkouts to protest Prop 187. Young people who have had enough of green migra trucks roaming our streets and our parents' workplaces, young people who are tired of being called wetbacks and spics, young people whose parents and families are threatened. These young people, and their allies and accomplices, walk out, just like the brave students in East LA did in 1968.

I hear the whispers, and I want to walk out too. I *need* to walk out.

My mother doesn't agree. When news of the walkouts reaches the adults, she is not impressed by my intentions. The protests my mom has seen end with riots, with police beating protesters, beating hociconas. She doesn't see or care about the why, she only sees the danger. On the morning of November 2, 1994, the day of the walkouts, when my mom drops me off at school, she puts our royal-blue 1964 Plymouth Valiant in park, turns to me, and warns me that I'd better stay in the classroom. That no matter how much I *think* I know what I'm doing, I don't know. That those kids only want to cause a commotion. That I am to keep my mouth shut and stay seated when the kids give the signal to walk out. Her exact words are: "No más te sales de la escuela, y no te la vas acabar." My mother is not a woman for idle threats. When she says that if I leave school, I'll sincerely regret it, she means it.

Although everything inside me is telling me to get up and make my voice heard, when the call to walk out comes, I stay in my chair and swallow my shame. Again.

I think about an hocicona I knew from sixth grade, Linda. When we were made to learn "God Bless the USA," our sixth-grade promotion performance, she sang the tune but replaced the patriotic propaganda with words to quebradita lyrics in Spanish. She was a real badass. As I sat, frozen in my seat by my mother's words, I imagined Linda getting up to join, no, to *lead,* her classmates out the door. Using her hocicona voice for good, to make a difference, not to be a troublemaker like our teachers would claim.

I should have walked out. Whatever the punishment—being grounded for weeks or even a rare, but memorable, spanking—I probably would have gotten over it more quickly than the shame I'll carry for the rest of my life.

7.

I am fourteen, and I am done with the Pledge of Allegiance. My classmates and I have been repeating it since kindergarten without ever being told why. After the walkouts, the riots, the racist nanas, the behavior of my peers, I begin to question everything. Prop 187 and Operation Gatekeeper have eroded any lingering belief in the stories I memorized in school: that all men are created equal, that everyone in this country is free, that this country doesn't see color.

Now I know otherwise. I know that the pledge we are forced to say in school is a farce.

It is a sunny spring morning. Sunlight creeps into our classroom from the large windows facing out to the street. It's a good day for saying no.

The intercom buzzes, and a classmate's voice instructs us to please stand and face the flag. This is the moment. Instead of putting my right hand over my heart, I stand straighter than I ever have during the pledge and place my hands firmly behind my back. I look over and Lauren K., a very tall blonde who loves ska and has a great smile, isn't putting her hand over her heart either. We are not really friends, but it looks like the two of us have decided we're done putting on a show we don't believe in.

Mrs. C., our science teacher, notices our silent protest and loses her goddamn mind. She tells us to wait for her in the hall.

Our backs rest on the cool metal of our lockers. Everyone is in their classrooms, busily starting their morning. Business as usual now that the announcements are over, except at our end of the hall where Mrs. C. starts in on us.

"Why aren't you saying the pledge?"

While I am nervous because I've been raised to accept that adults are never wrong and must be respected at ALL times, my mouth begins to move. "Because it's a lie."

This is not what our teacher expects to hear.

"What did you say?"

"It's a lie. There isn't justice or liberty for *everyone* in this country, so why would I pledge to a lie?"

Lauren speaks up and gives a similar rationale.

I zone out as Mrs. C. yells about how disrespectful we are and how we need to think about how people die for the flag and on and on. She doesn't change my mind.

I never say the pledge again.

8.

I am forty-two, and nearly three decades separate me from the day I stopped saying the pledge. I write books for young people and my books are being banned, especially my novel *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces.* Even my gentle picture book, *My Papi Has a Motorcycle,* has been challenged. Books that simply affirm the *existence* of multiple American experiences, like mine, like yours, are accused of undermining the self-esteem of white and Christian children with their “woke” agenda. This accusation erases realities not only of BIPOC communities but also of white communities who do not adhere to the censorship agenda. Since becoming a mother, I’ve needed to think about what kind of future I want for my kid. Just like my mom had to think about the future she wanted for me. The difference is that I am fully embracing my hocicona-ness because I know that silence will not make me, or my child, safe.

9.

My mother named me Isabel Sarah after both of my abuelitas, even though her mother was angry that she was pregnant and believed she was “living in sin.” She was twenty-five years old and had, only a few years before, traveled from the middle of Mexico to the US, alone and afraid.

Some facts about my mom:

✓ On that trip she stabbed a dude in the hand who’d started feeling her up on the bus while she slept. (It was a small knife and not a deep wound, but it got his attention.) The bus driver stopped right where they were and made the man get off.
✓ The year I was born, she got to have about a month off with me and then had to go back to her full-time job working in a kitchen. She tells me now about how she’d cry when she got to work each day because she missed me so much.
✓ If my mom saw a green border patrol truck on the road she would turn her car around and warn the day laborers who stood on corners waiting to get picked up for work.
✓ She taught many of her friends to drive when their husbands wouldn’t.
✓ One time we got pulled over, and the police officer yelled at my parents, asking for their papers so loudly that my baby brother

started crying. My mom yelled right back at the cop, asking if he was immigration because it didn't look like it to her. She did it without a shake in her voice in her newly minted English. And she wrote down his name and badge number—that shut him up.

✓ Once she got in a fistfight in the street defending my tía, who couldn't keep her mouth shut either. (This was the only time she's ever told me about, but I doubt it was the *only* time.)

* * *

Being an hocicona is a complicated dance. Not everyone is going to like you. Some people will call you tacky and loud. They will question the way you move and call it inappropriate, unladylike. But these people's objections come from their own failures, especially the failure to appreciate the dance or imagine why anyone would risk a broken limb if they have the option to sit and stay comfortable for the small price of keeping their mouths shut. These people, like book banners, are afraid not only of change but of those who create change. And hociconas? We create and welcome change.

Hociconas are brave cycle breakers. After trying to be "good" and failing (because no one wins at that game), we choose instead to do everything we can to be true to ourselves, to what we feel is our true self, in spite of the weight of tradition and patriarchy, the weight of racism and religion. Hociconas are real women who survive and live and thrive. These are the women I write about.

Hociconas, and my belief that we deserve to be seen and heard, are the reason I write, the reason why I wrote *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*. Gabi is a senior in high school. She's also a fat, light-skinned Chicana whose dad struggles with addiction and whose mom has a strict idea of what it means to be a woman. There are a lot of connections to my experiences in the book, but *Gabi* is a work of fiction. Gabi is her own unique kind of hocicona. Gabi and I are pretty close homies, but we're not the same person.

Although *Gabi* is about a Chicana teen, I've had folks of many ages and walks of life tell me how much the book has meant to them. From young Chicanas in LA to older white women in Visalia to queer men in Texas, I have heard how people connect to Gabi, how the novel is the first book they've finished, or how they'd never before seen a character so much like themselves/their mom/their dad. I've had high school girls come up to me and confide that the same thing that happened to Cindy, Gabi's best friend, happened to them, or that their aunt is just like Tía Bertha, or that their parent struggles with an addiction and they could relate so much to how Gabi felt about her dad.

In my work I try to honor the truth, as I know it, no matter how uncomfortable it may be for others but especially for myself. I've been inspired to write about uncomfortable realities by amazing hociconas. Judy Blume's banned books were there for me when I needed to think about questions that made my parents uncomfortable. Michele Serros's honest work and Spanglish offered me a mirror[*] at the right time. I think of the fierce characters and unapologetic truth-telling of Aida Salazar, Elizabeth Acevedo, Renée Watson, and Meg Medina, among many others. My voice has been shaped, and strengthened, by these contemporary hociconas who write about

Gabi, a Girl in Pieces has been out for ten years now. The book won several awards when it was published, and it is still being taught across the country. In the last couple of years, I've started to get an email here and there from a teacher dealing with a parent who says my book is "pornographic." Anyone who actually reads the book will understand that there is nothing pornographic about it. There are mentions of sex, but without any graphic details. There are a queer character and addiction. There are a lot of f-bombs. For the people I came up with, and for most teenagers, none of this stuff is out of the ordinary. Maybe you're not queer, but some of your classmates are. Maybe your parents don't struggle with addiction, but your friends' parents do or you see it play out in your apartment building or neighborhood. Maybe you don’t think about sex, but you deal with a lot of classmates who do. Maybe you didn’t get pregnant in high school, but you know someone who did.

When adults call the realities of young people pornographic, when they refuse to acknowledge that adolescence isn’t a time of innocence and ease for everyone, when they try to take away books that reflect the wide range of experiences of young people, they are attempting to change the narrative of what it means to be a teen in the United States. And there are many wonderful and painful ways to be a young person. Book banning purposefully omits the beauty and heartbreak and diversity of teen experience, and it sends the message that there is only room for one story—and ours is not it. Book banners create a false idea of what it is like to be a teen in this country. They erase large swaths of lives and experiences because they are not like the fantasy they imagined, the fantasy they need, maybe, to feel good about themselves and their choices. And their devotion to this fantasy plays out in an effort to deny and restrict and remove stories and information that matter to real teens.

Did you know that teen pregnancies are at an all-time low, and that the highest rates of teen pregnancy were actually in the good ol’ days, the 1950s and 1960s? The thing that changed the trend was giving teens access to accurate information about sex and contraceptives.

Knowledge changed everything.

And when knowledge is a source of fear, as it seems to be for book banners, it is our duty to be as scary as possible.

Hociconas, it is our time to shine.

* * *

Sometimes hociconas like my mom try their best to raise their daughters to be quiet and well-behaved. These strong women know the price of being “bad.” They don’t want their daughters to go through what they went through, to lose what they lost. But there is a loss either way. My mother knows what she has lost by being loud, by pushing against tradition. I know what I lost in silence, by squeezing into expectations that feel all wrong. I know the cost of staying in my seat when everything in me says I should walk out. I know the pain of trying to be the señorita who sits pretty and calladita, everything small and unthreatening, especially her voice.

I don't miss being that girl. I was never good at it, and I'm happier since I stopped. I will keep writing about real women, and writing against the rules that keep us small and silent. My goal in my work is to inspire more hociconas and hocicones and hociconxs to break the rules that keep us, or others, quiet and invisible. To inspire us all to take up space, be loud, and resist.

Young people are often asked to accept at face value whatever adults say is the truth. The reasoning is that adults are adults and always know better. As an adult, I can tell you that this is not always the case. The adults bent on silencing you have forgotten what it's like to imagine a better, more just future. They have forgotten that young people like you are capable of critical thought and leadership. They refuse to believe that what you lack in experience (though many of you have gone through things these book banners could never imagine), you can make up for in passion and energy.

The people who want to ban books certainly don't seem to believe young people can think for themselves.

Or maybe book banners' frantic efforts to empty the shelves of school libraries come from fears rooted in the very opposite of underestimation. Maybe these adults, these book banners, these pearl clutchers and antiknowledge warriors, know *exactly* what young people are capable of. Maybe they know that once young people learn that something is unjust, they won't just let it go. Maybe these censors, these dangerous nationalists, understand that reading is not only knowledge, but *connection,* not only with each other but with the past and the present. Maybe these adults understand that books connect young people, that books give them something to hold on to, that books talk to them about things the adults in their lives often refuse to discuss, that books allow them to be *seen* and to feel *heard* in ways they may not have experienced even with the people closest to them. Maybe these adults understand that when young people begin to learn how much has been taken from them, they may not only reclaim it but demand more and better. They may demand the truth.

I believe in young people. I meet young people whose moral compasses are stronger than the adults who claim to be their guides. I see young people who stand up for other kids, young people who walk out of school for their classmates' rights. I watch young people join protests in the street. I listen as young people claim their power and voice with more confidence than the generations before them.

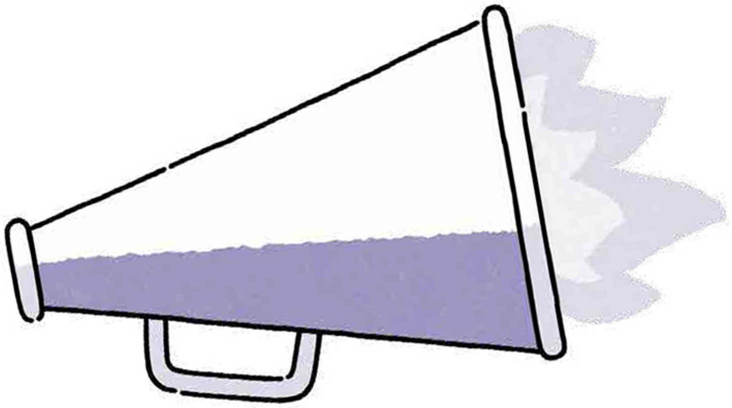
Their no is stronger and less reserved than the nos of my generation. And it's most inspiring because every no means there is the possibility of a more powerful yes.

NO to blind obedience and indoctrination; YES to critical thinking and questioning.

NO to accepting the status quo in exchange for false safety; YES to real change and holding those in power accountable.

NO to keeping our mouths shut and neglecting our needs, wants, and boundaries; YES to embracing hocicona power.

Whether we're activists, poets, artists, musicians, teachers, parents, athletes, writers, or anything else, we are the ones who get to decide where our NOs end and our YES begins. We choose what, and who, we give power to.



10.

I'm forty-two years old, and it's been years since my mom has scolded me for talking back. I'm still an hocicona, but now I am an hocicona with a wider audience, with more eyes on me and ears listening. Now instead of my words frustrating the hell out of my mom, they frustrate the hell out of people set on taking away students' right to read and parents' right for their kids to access books chosen with care by teachers and librarians.

Two of my books have been banned. It's upsetting when I think of the empty spaces on the library shelves where *Gabi* and *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* should be. Both of these books have a lot of my youth in them, so when they're banned I feel like I'm being told that my truths are somehow offensive and obscene. If I'm honest, sometimes the fear and hate spewed by book banners get to me and it takes longer to write the stories I'm working on. But I don't stop. I *won't* stop, that's for damn sure.

Nopity nope nope.

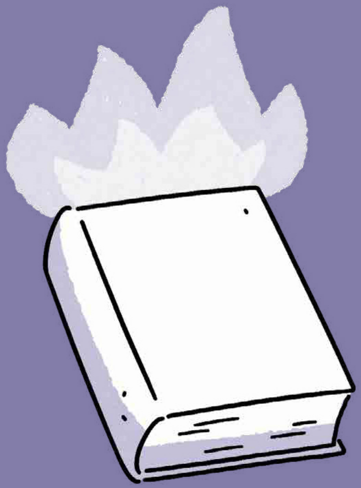
My mom didn't raise a quitter—she raised an hocicona.

In the words of Gabi Hernandez, "If words are our weapons, we must ask ourselves, why should we use rocks and sticks when we have tanks available?"

The time of las hociconas is here. All hail las hociconas! Long live las hociconas!

SKIP NOTES

[*] Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop came up with the metaphor of books having the ability to offer mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors for the young people who read them in her essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors."young people really going through it and speaking their truths.

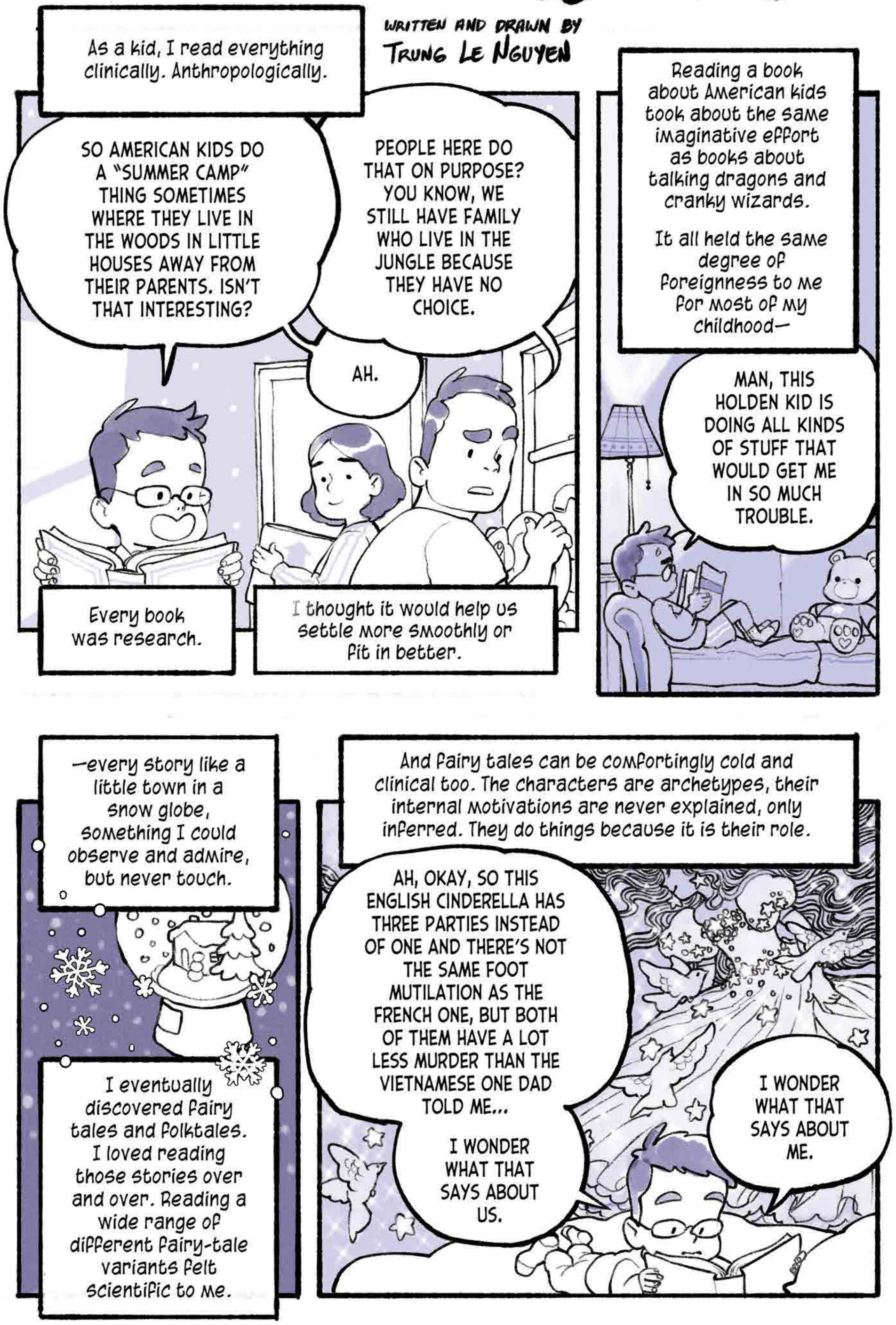


TRUNG LE NGUYEN

Trung Le Nguyen is an award-winning Vietnamese American cartoonist, artist, and writer from Minnesota. Trung's first original graphic novel, *The Magic Fish,* was published by Random House Graphic, an imprint of Penguin Random House. He has been nominated for an Eisner Award; a prize at the International Comics Festival in Angoulême, France; and a GLAAD award, and has won two Harvey Awards and a Romics (Italy). Trung has also contributed work to DC Comics, Oni Press, Boom! Studios, Image Comics, and Marvel. He lives in Minneapolis and raises a small flock of very spoiled hens.

LIVE in the WORLD

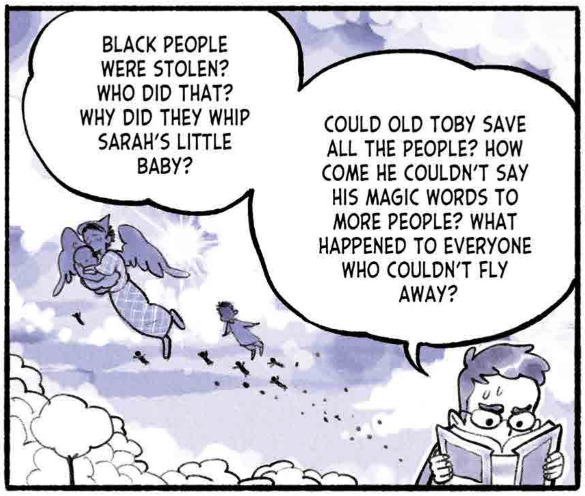
WRITTEN AND DRAWN BY
TRUNG LE NGUYEN


As a kid, I read everything clinically. Anthropologically.
SO AMERICAN KIDS DO A "SUMMER CAMP" THING SOMETIMES WHERE THEY LIVE IN THE WOODS IN LITTLE HOUSES AWAY FROM THEIR PARENTS. ISN'T THAT INTERESTING?
PEOPLE HERE DO THAT ON PURPOSE? YOU KNOW, WE STILL HAVE FAMILY WHO LIVE IN THE JUNGLE BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO CHOICE.
AH.
Every book was research.
I thought it would help us settle more smoothly or fit in better.
Reading a book about American kids took about the same imaginative effort as books about talking dragons and cranky wizards.
It all held the same degree of foreignness to me for most of my childhood—
MAN, THIS HOLDEN KID IS DOING ALL KINDS OF STUFF THAT WOULD GET ME IN SO MUCH TROUBLE.
—every story like a little town in a snow globe, something I could observe and admire, but never touch.
I eventually discovered fairy tales and folktales. I loved reading those stories over and over. Reading a wide range of different fairy-tale variants felt scientific to me.
And fairy tales can be comfortingly cold and clinical too. The characters are archetypes, their internal motivations are never explained, only inferred. They do things because it is their role.
AH, OKAY, SO THIS ENGLISH CINDERELLA HAS THREE PARTIES INSTEAD OF ONE AND THERE'S NOT THE SAME FOOT MUTILATION AS THE FRENCH ONE, BUT BOTH OF THEM HAVE A LOT LESS MURDER THAN THE VIETNAMESE ONE DAD TOLD ME...
I WONDER WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT US.
I WONDER WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT ME.

One day I picked up *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton. I had asked the librarian to search for books illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon because they were my favorite illustrators at the time, and she'd picked up on the fact that I loved fairy tales. It felt so different from the Perrault and Grimm stories. Those were snow globe stories. Those could live on my shelf. This one felt like it was making a home in me, somehow, and it sowed difficult questions in me. I wanted to know more.

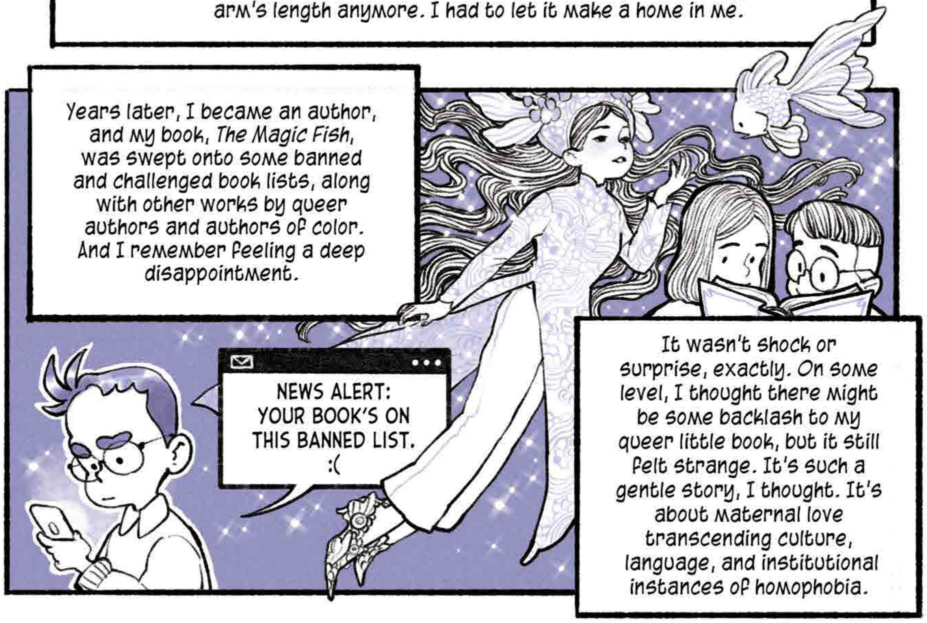
Suddenly, books and stories were no longer aloof documents of lives I'd never live. They became accounts of human yearning and necessity. They became calls to empathy and to action. I could no longer be satisfied with rote, empty curiosity.

I was no longer a dispassionate reader. I was a *participant*. I had stakes and responsibilities.


BLACK PEOPLE WERE STOLEN? WHO DID THAT? WHY DID THEY WHIP SARAH'S LITTLE BABY?
COULD OLD TOBY SAVE ALL THE PEOPLE? HOW COME HE COULDN'T SAY HIS MAGIC WORDS TO MORE PEOPLE? WHAT HAPPENED TO EVERYONE WHO COULDN'T FLY AWAY?

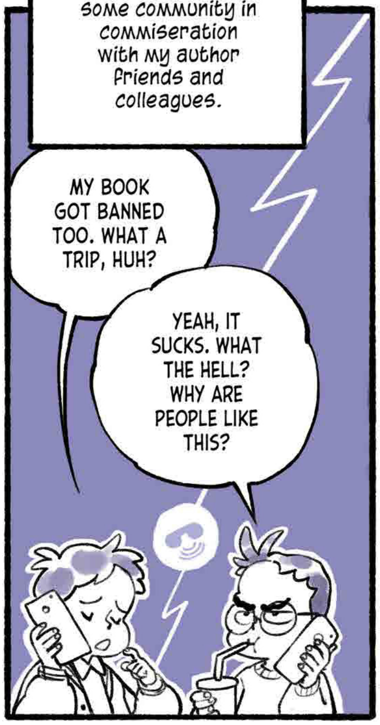
I was living in the world. I couldn't just hold a painful story at arm's length anymore. I had to let it make a home in me.

Years later, I became an author, and my book, *The Magic Fish*, was swept onto some banned and challenged book lists, along with other works by queer authors and authors of color. And I remember feeling a deep disappointment.

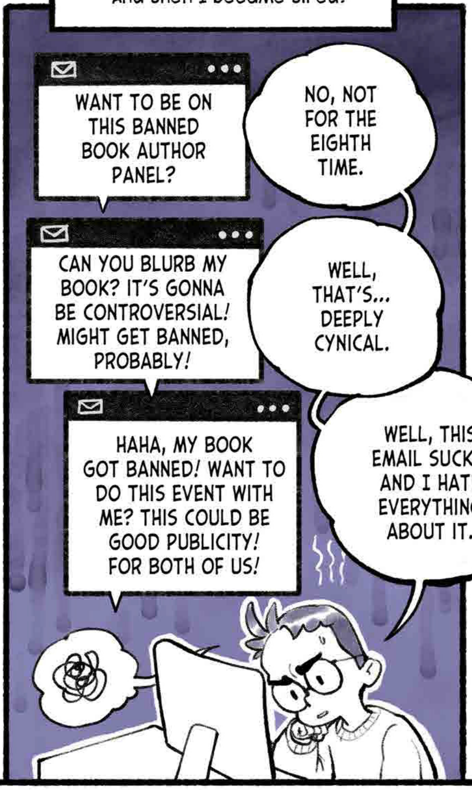

NEWS ALERT: YOUR BOOK'S ON THIS BANNED LIST. :(

It wasn't shock or surprise, exactly. *On some level*, I thought there might be some backlash to my queer little book, but it still felt strange. It's such a gentle story, I thought. It's about maternal love transcending culture, language, and institutional instances of homophobia.

At first I found some community in commiseration with my author friends and colleagues.


MY BOOK GOT BANNED TOO. WHAT A TRIP, HUH?
YEAH, IT SUCKS. WHAT THE HELL? WHY ARE PEOPLE LIKE THIS?

And then I became tired.

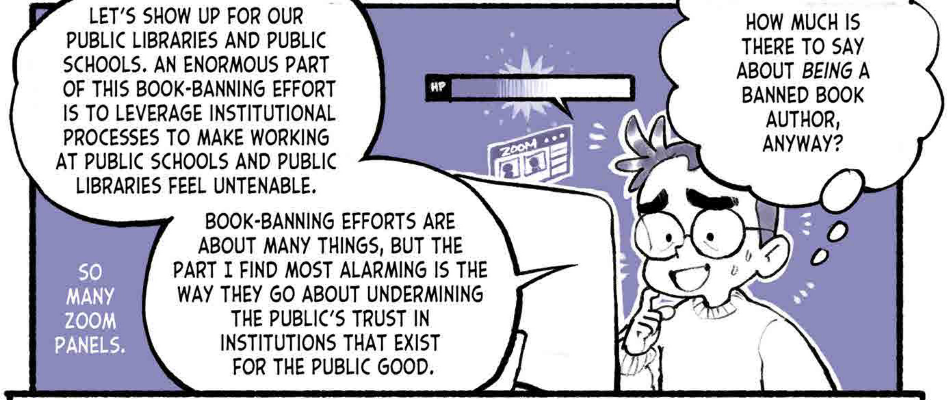

WANT TO BE ON THIS BANNED BOOK AUTHOR PANEL?

CAN YOU BLURB MY BOOK? IT'S GONNA BE CONTROVERSIAL! MIGHT GET BANNED, PROBABLY!

HAHA, MY BOOK GOT BANNED! WANT TO DO THIS EVENT WITH ME? THIS COULD BE GOOD PUBLICITY! FOR BOTH OF US!

NO, NOT FOR THE EIGHTH TIME.
WELL, THAT'S... DEEPLY CYNICAL.
WELL, THIS EMAIL SUCKS, AND I HATE EVERYTHING ABOUT IT.

I couldn't stomach the idea of doing one more Banned Author thing. But I felt a responsibility to keep speaking up about it, so I shifted my focus.


LET'S SHOW UP FOR OUR PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS. AN ENORMOUS PART OF THIS BOOK-BANNING EFFORT IS TO LEVERAGE INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES TO MAKE WORKING AT PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES FEEL UNTENABLE.
BOOK-BANNING EFFORTS ARE ABOUT MANY THINGS, BUT THE PART I FIND MOST ALARMING IS THE WAY THEY GO ABOUT UNDERMINING THE PUBLIC'S TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS THAT EXIST FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD.
HP
ZOOM
HOW MUCH IS THERE TO SAY ABOUT *BEING* A BANNED BOOK AUTHOR, ANYWAY?
SO MANY ZOOM PANELS.

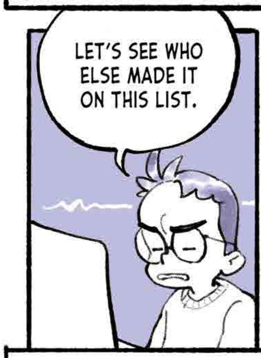
I was much more comfortable with this approach. I still am. Centering book bans as a systemic issue allows me a certain amount of aloofness. I didn't need to be in my feelings quite so much. I could depersonalize it and hold it at arm's length.

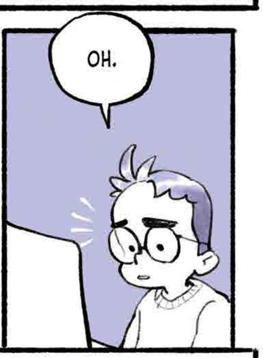
I was so hesitant to write about my own feelings on book bans. It exhausts me. I didn't even want to do it for this anthology.

It's not the work I set out to do when I became an author.

Toni Morrison said it best: "The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over, your reason for being."

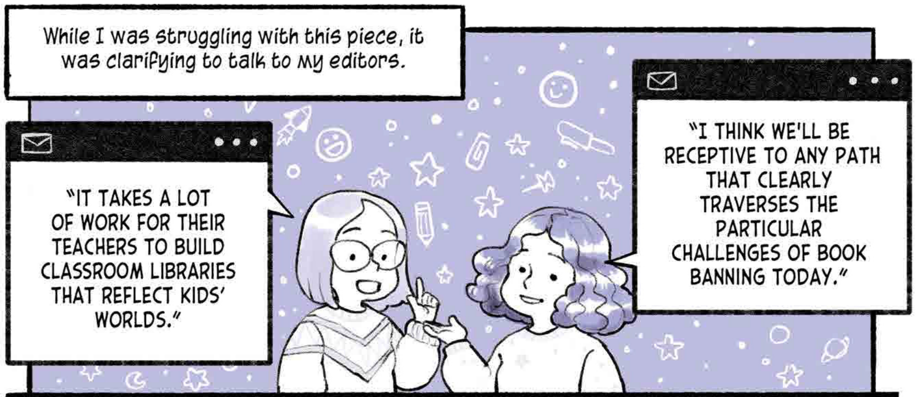
One day, as I was perusing a banned book list, I saw Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*.


LET'S SEE WHO ELSE MADE IT ON THIS LIST.



And suddenly, it was personal again.

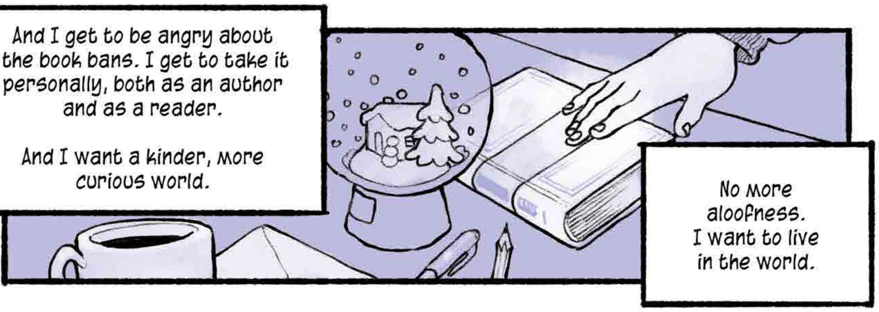
While I was struggling with this piece, it was clarifying to talk to my editors.


"IT TAKES A LOT OF WORK FOR THEIR TEACHERS TO BUILD CLASSROOM LIBRARIES THAT REFLECT KIDS' WORLDS."
"I THINK WE'LL BE RECEPTIVE TO ANY PATH THAT CLEARLY TRAVERSES THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF BOOK BANNING TODAY."

I realized that book bannings are about authors *and* readers. The aim is to make a crueler and more incurious world by forcing libraries to lie by omission, to blot out people like me—queer and nonwhite—from public life. To erase powerful lines of flight like those in Virginia Hamilton's book. Book banners want to pretend people like me do not live in the world. But we exist. We are here. And we want to be here.

And I get to be angry about the book bans. I get to take it personally, both as an author and as a reader.

And I want a kinder, more curious world.



No more aloofness. I want to live in the world.

BLACK HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY

For years, Black history in US schools focused almost exclusively on enslavement and the civil rights movement, with some attention to a handful of Black leaders.

We've always needed to learn more, but today, even these limited topics are under attack. In places like Florida, Texas, and Oklahoma, just the mention of race or discrimination can be made cause for discontinuing the use of a textbook or removing a book from a library.

Book banners are especially keen on targeting books that acknowledge how anti-Black racism persists in the present, as evidenced by police brutality, incarceration rates, and unequal access to health care and education. You can help by reading and talking about these issues—and the books that engage with them. Here are a few to get you started!

Banned Nonfiction on Black History and Roots of Racism

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story, **by Nikole Hannah-Jones**

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, **by Isabel Wilkerson**

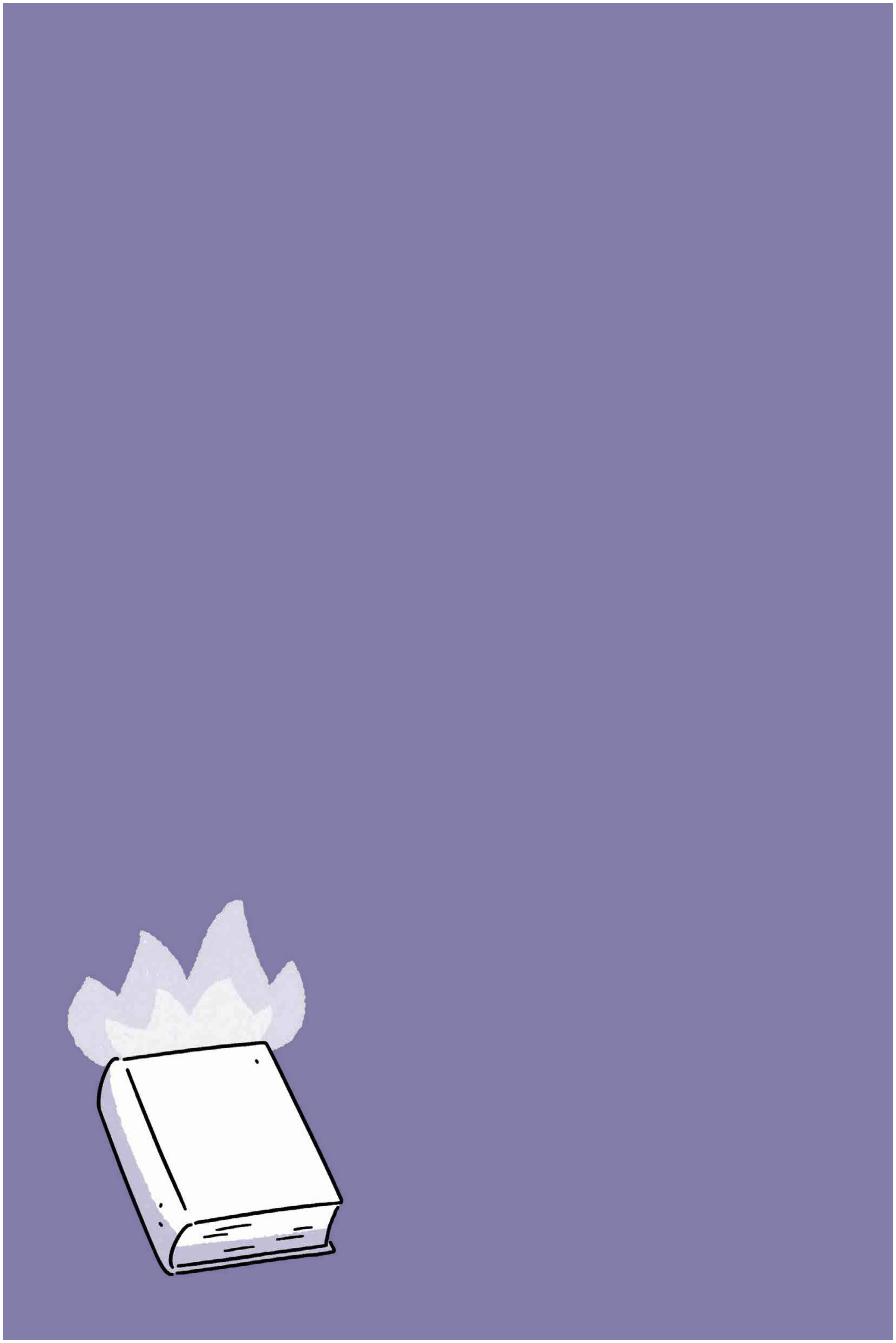
The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race, **edited by Jesmyn Ward**

How to Be a (Young) Antiracist, **by Ibram X. Kendi and Nic Stone**

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You, **by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds**

Banned Literature About Black Experiences, Past and Present

All American Boys, **by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely**
The Bluest Eye, **by Toni Morrison**
The Color Purple, **by Alice Walker**
Dear Martin, **by Nic Stone**
Their Eyes Were Watching God, **by Zora Neale Hurston**
The Hate U Give, **by Angie Thomas**
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, **by Maya Angelou**
Monster, **by Walter Dean Myers**
Push, **by Sapphire**



KYLE LUKOFF

Kyle Lukoff is the author of many books for young readers. His debut middle grade novel, *Too Bright to See,* received a Newbery Honor and a Stonewall Award and was a National Book Award finalist. His picture book *When Aidan Became a Brother* also won a Stonewall Award, and his book *Call Me Max* has been banned in schools across the country. He has forthcoming books about apologies, death, unicycles, and lots of other topics. While becoming a writer, he worked as a bookseller for ten years, and then for nine more years as a school librarian.

STANDING AT THE CENTER

KYLE LUKOFF

One of the most common questions I get, as an often-banned author, is "What does it feel like when your books get banned?" Sometimes it's phrased as "How did you feel when …?" or "How do you feel about …?" My answer to that question has evolved somewhat, from a shrug and an "I don't really know" to a curt "Bad. It feels bad. I don't know how else to answer that question."

I answer this way because I don't like talking about my feelings to strangers. I barely like talking about my feelings at all. I am not someone who is especially in tune with his emotions, and have been known to respond to the perfunctory question "How are you?" with wild-eyed panic, because I usually have no idea.

Still, there is another answer I could give to that question, the one about book banning. There is another way to describe how I feel. It's less monosyllabic, but more dramatic. And depressing. And maybe even … inappropriate? I don't know, but I do know that feelings rarely conform to what is appropriate.

That answer lies within a place I visited once. In the center of Berlin is something called the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Some people refer to it as the German Holocaust Memorial.

The memorial is made up of blocks of stone. Large ones. They are rectangles. Almost eight feet long. Three feet wide. They are identical. They are smooth, and sheer, and sharp. They are close together, but there are paths in between, and you can walk among them. They are not boulders haphazardly scattered in a field. They did not get there by accident. They were made by people, and put there, carefully and deliberately, by people.

The first ones you walk through are close to the ground. Some of them are barely off the ground at all. Others are ankle-high, and then knee-high. They are easy to step around, easy to get past. Enough to trip over, but not enough to really get in the way.

When my first trans-themed picture book, *When Aidan Became a Brother,* came out in 2019, I encountered a few blocks. Nothing like a wholesale book ban, nothing like the movement we're seeing now, but some obstacles I had to navigate. Teachers telling me they were afraid to read my book to their class because "The children might have"—cue the ominous pause—"questions." (As if the point of school is something other than having questions and exploring them.)

Another block: Sometimes, when I arrived for a school visit, the librarian would tell me that a kid, or "just a few kids," had been pulled from school by their families for the day, over fears of what I might expose their children to.

And another: I'd sit behind my table at book festivals and watch some seemingly nice person pick up the book and smile, telling me about a soon-to-be big sibling in their life, then watch them flip through the book and put it down with disgust curling their lip, suddenly unable to look at me.

These early challenges were minor hurdles, much like the first blocks in place at the Holocaust memorial. But my journey, like that of visitors to the monument in Berlin, took me deeper into the experience of obstruction.

The first blocks, like I said, are low to the ground. But then they get taller. And then they get even taller. And if you keep moving into the memorial, before you quite realize what has happened, you have walked into the middle of it. You are suddenly completely overwhelmed. The blocks tower over your head, and they are so close together that you can only see what is directly in front of you. There are places in the middle where you can barely glimpse any way out. It is dark there in the center, even on a sunny day. It feels hard to take a full breath.

This is how I have felt as the movement to ban books—which cannot be honestly separated from banning the people who write the books and the people represented in them—has steadily surrounded me with higher and higher obstacles. Those first, minor hurdles were the easy days.

Being a banned author in America feels like seeing these blocks rise up in every direction, knowing that they are not natural outcroppings or inevitable outgrowths. They are made by people, and organized by people, and put into place by people. It feels like being trapped in the middle of something I had no hand in building, and there is no easy path out.

I am an American Jew, whose great-grandparents came to this country fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe. When the governor of Florida held up an image from my book *Call Me Max,* with the caption "Found in Florida" emblazoned across the top in the style of a WANTED poster, my shtetl ancestors started yelling at me. They yelled that this is the sort of thing they escaped from, that the wrong people now knew my name. I felt like those tall, sharp, sheer blocks of the memorial were crowding into me, making it impossible to get through.

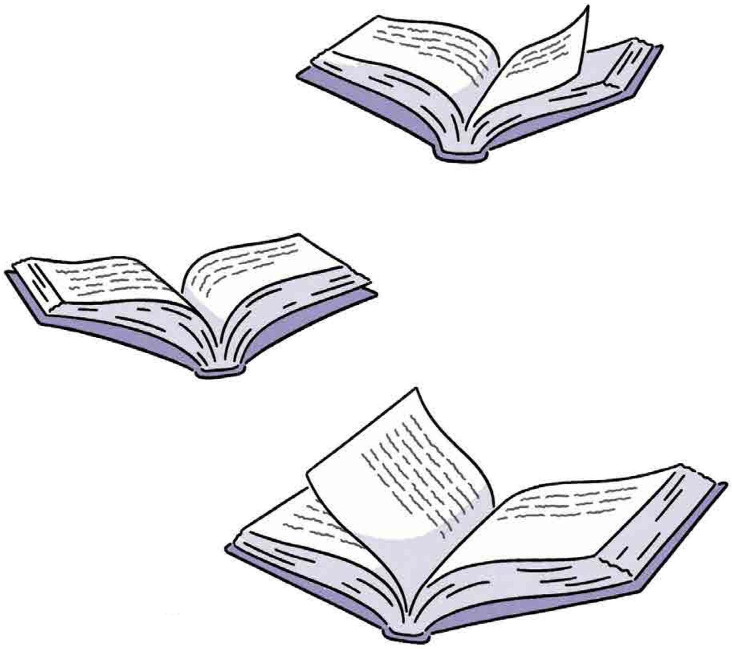
The point of the memorial, I think—or one point, since public artworks open themselves up for endless interpretations—is to encourage visitors to notice where things begin, and where they end. I know that attacks on books and literature and authors and librarians are not the same thing as attacking people's physical bodies, or putting their bodies in the way of direct harm. But I also know—as the memorial reminds us—that large-scale movements often begin in small ways, and metastasize quickly if no one does anything to stop them, or if resistance comes too late.

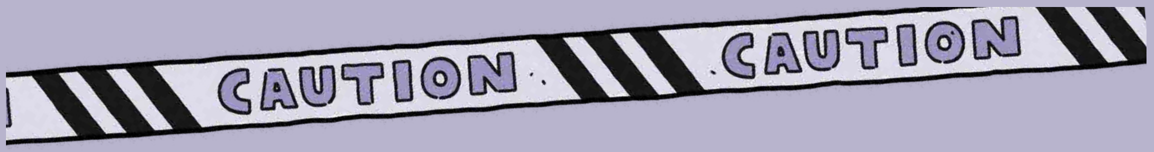
Every book removal, every act of censorship, every bill attacking books and libraries, every time an author or reader is reduced to a controversy rather than being allowed to be a human being with particular needs and gifts, another barricade is placed in that field of stumbling blocks. These blocks isolate us and pen us in from every angle. It was dark in the center of the memorial; the heart of the movement to ban books, too, is a dark place.

Human beings created the sharp stones of the Berlin memorial to reflect barriers that exist in the world. It might seem like the blocks emerging today—accusations, controversies, legislation, constant debates over whether or not certain kinds of books or kids or people should be allowed to exist—are natural and inevitable and unavoidable. But they are not. They are made by people, and put in place by people. And that means that when people come across these blocks in their lives, in their worlds, they can take them down.

The memorial asks us to consider what might have happened if citizens had noticed those first few blocks, the kind that are easy to ignore or get around, and said, “No more of these.” What might have happened if people had recognized that treating marginalized people as an enemy to be defeated would lead them to, well, the Holocaust.

Every time I find out that my book has been banned in a school or library or community, I hear from people who live there—queer and trans people and their allies—who are using whatever resources they have to fight back. I hear from people who have spoken up at school board meetings, and gone to protests, and signed petitions, and donated books to support groups. When I feel separated from others in the middle of a controversy, it is isolating and lonely, but knowing that there are friends, comrades, and allies fighting alongside me lets me see a way through. It allows me to breathe more easily. It feels like we have a chance of getting out, together.





CAUTION
CAUTION

DISCOVER WHAT BOOK BANNERS WANT TO HIDE

Book bans frequently target writing that engages honestly with history and/or uncomfortable facts. Banners go after books that reveal past or present injustices, sources of inequality, and societal shortcomings. Often, they claim that these topics are unpatriotic, traumatizing, divisive, or even discriminatory against white readers.

While it can be upsetting to learn about the terrible choices made by people of the past—including those who may have been celebrated as heroes—that does not mean that the *books* addressing the truth of our history are bad or harmful. They are important! Ugly histories should upset us—and confronting what is broken in our past is one way that we can aim for a more accountable, equitable future.

Books that reveal injustices are like whistleblowers or advocates, bravely speaking up. Think about a situation where a child tells an adult that her best friend is being harmed at home. A decent parent would never say, “Don’t you know child abuse is bad? It’s terribly upsetting to hear what you’re reporting about your friend! Why would you talk about such a thing?” Is it inconvenient and upsetting to learn that someone has been or is being mistreated? Of course! That doesn’t make it any less important.

In this example, it’s easy to see the absurdity of treating *speaking up about harm* as if it were the harm itself. But that’s exactly what book banners are doing when they insist that it is dangerous or damaging for students to read books addressing painful topics.

As a result, book bans have stripped libraries across the country of titles about important histories, including the horrors of slavery, marginalized groups’ fights for equal rights, internment camps that imprisoned Japanese Americans during World War II, the US turning away Jewish immigrants during the Holocaust, and violence and genocide against Indigenous Peoples. Book banning doesn't stop with the hardest histories. It also targets books that address discrimination, even in the gentlest terms. That has meant the removal of books telling the stories of Latinx heroes, women scientists, Korean artists, civil rights leaders, Navajo code talkers, African American inventors, queer activists, Chinese women, and more.

In ban-bombed districts or places where school leaders have pressured librarians and teachers to remove books that haven't even been challenged, students of all backgrounds miss out on the chance to see the diversity of our histories, in all their pain and beauty. And *that* is the real harm.

Don't accept the "big" or familiar stories as the only histories that matter. Get curious about people's histories, stories of past events from the perspective of common people rather than leaders or those groups with the most power. Ask whose story is missing, and look for ways to turn up the volume on the experiences that have often been sidelined. If you're doing research or a project for a history class, consider how you can bring attention to the hidden figures of history—including those that book banners are trying to put out of sight right now. If we seek out the stories that have been pushed to the margins of history, we can begin to change who gets to matter now and in the future.

Here are a few great online resources where you can find out more about some of the histories that book bans often target.

CAUTION
CAUTION

GET STARTED

Learning for Justice: www.learningforjustice.org/

Resources on justice and history, arranged by topic.

The Zinn Education Project for Teaching People's History: www.zinnedproject.org/

The #1 starting place for learning about intersections between people's history and social justice issues today.

DIG DEEPER

Berkeley Archives on the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement: www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft/oral-history-center/projects/disability-rights

Oral histories, papers, and other materials documenting how people with disabilities fought to gain legally defined civil rights and control over their own lives.

Civil Rights History Project: www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project

Library of Congress resources about the civil rights movement including interviews, videos, and documents.

Densho Japanese American Archives: densho.org/

Primary sources that document the Japanese American experience from immigration in the early 1900s through the present, with a focus on unjust internment during World War II.

Native Knowledge 360 Degrees: americanindian.si.edu/nk360

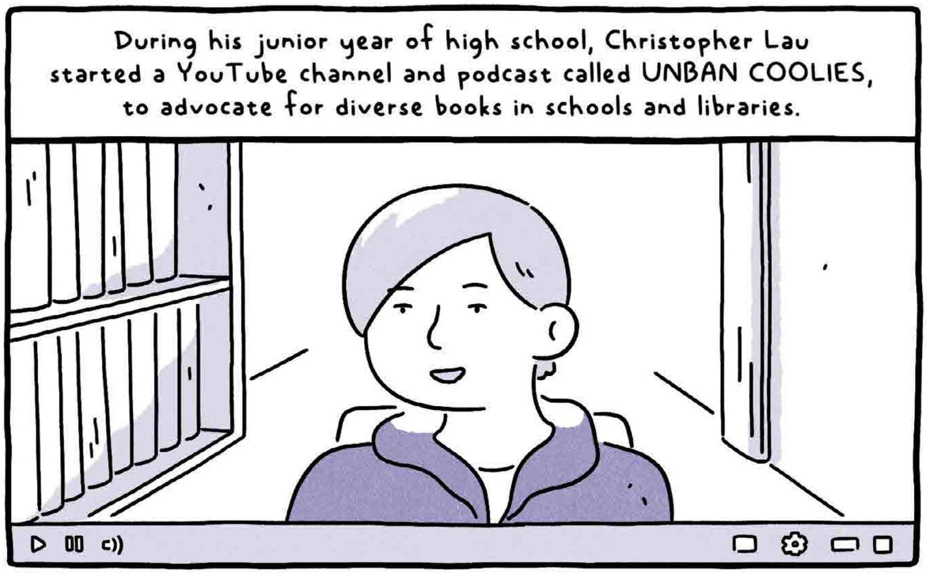
Interactive learning about the past and present, hosted by the Smithsonian Institution and led by Native scholars.

Tracked in America: www.trackedinamerica.org/

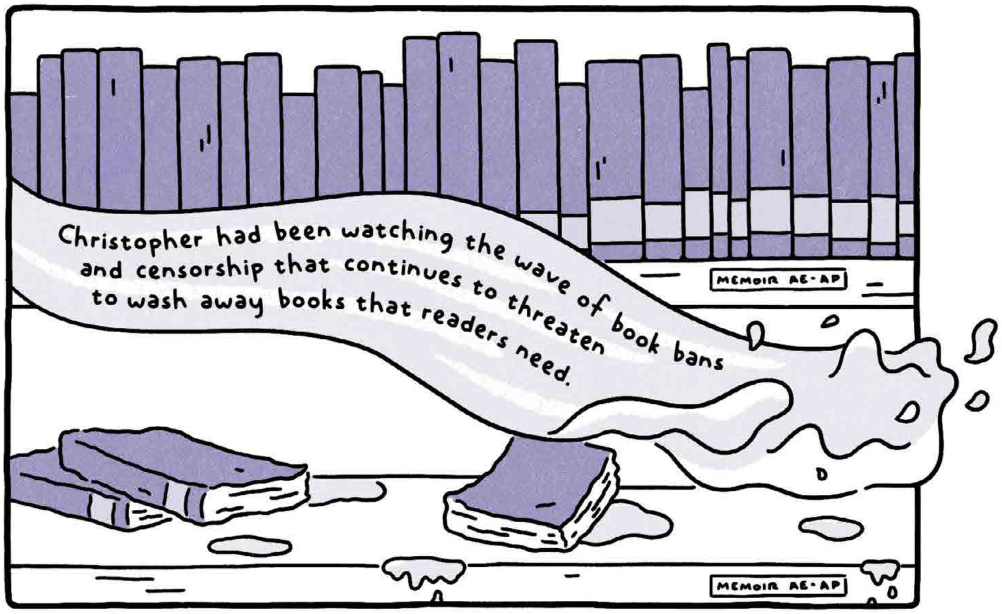
Stories from the history of US government surveillance across the centuries.

CHRISTOPHER LAU: UNBAN COOLIES AND YOUTUBE ACTIVISM

By Ashley Hope Pérez and Debbie Fong

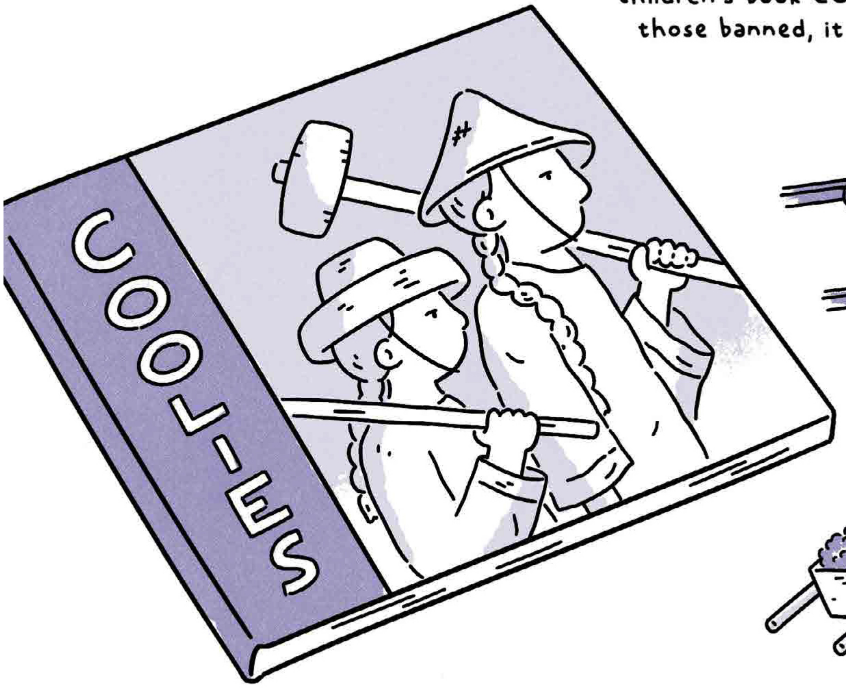


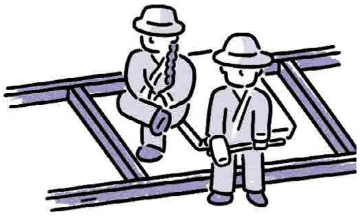
During his junior year of high school, Christopher Lau started a YouTube channel and podcast called UNBAN COOLIES, to advocate for diverse books in schools and libraries.

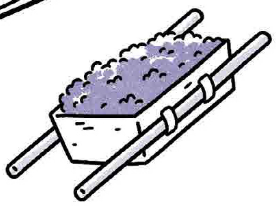


Christopher had been watching the wave of book bans and censorship that continues to threaten to wash away books that readers need.

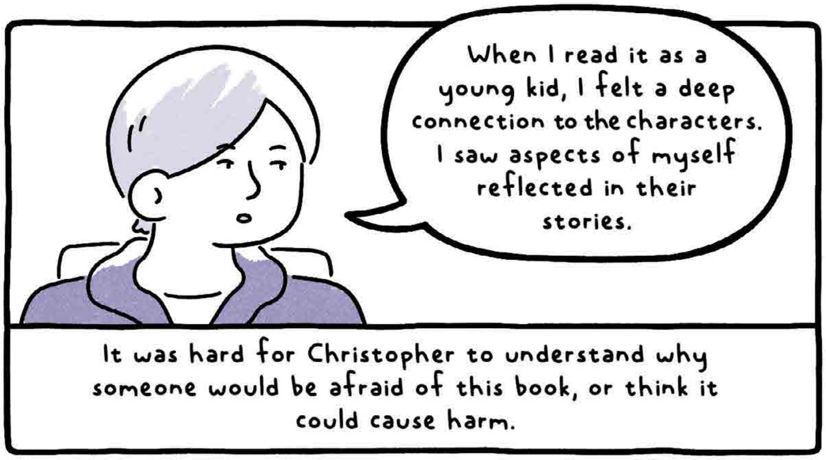
When Christopher saw the children's book COOLIES* among those banned, it hit him hard.







The story depicts the harsh truth of life for Chinese railroad workers in 1865 and highlights their perseverance and bravery. It had been one of Christopher's favorite books.


When I read it as a young kid, I felt a deep connection to the characters. I saw aspects of myself reflected in their stories.

It was hard for Christopher to understand why someone would be afraid of this book, or think it could cause harm.

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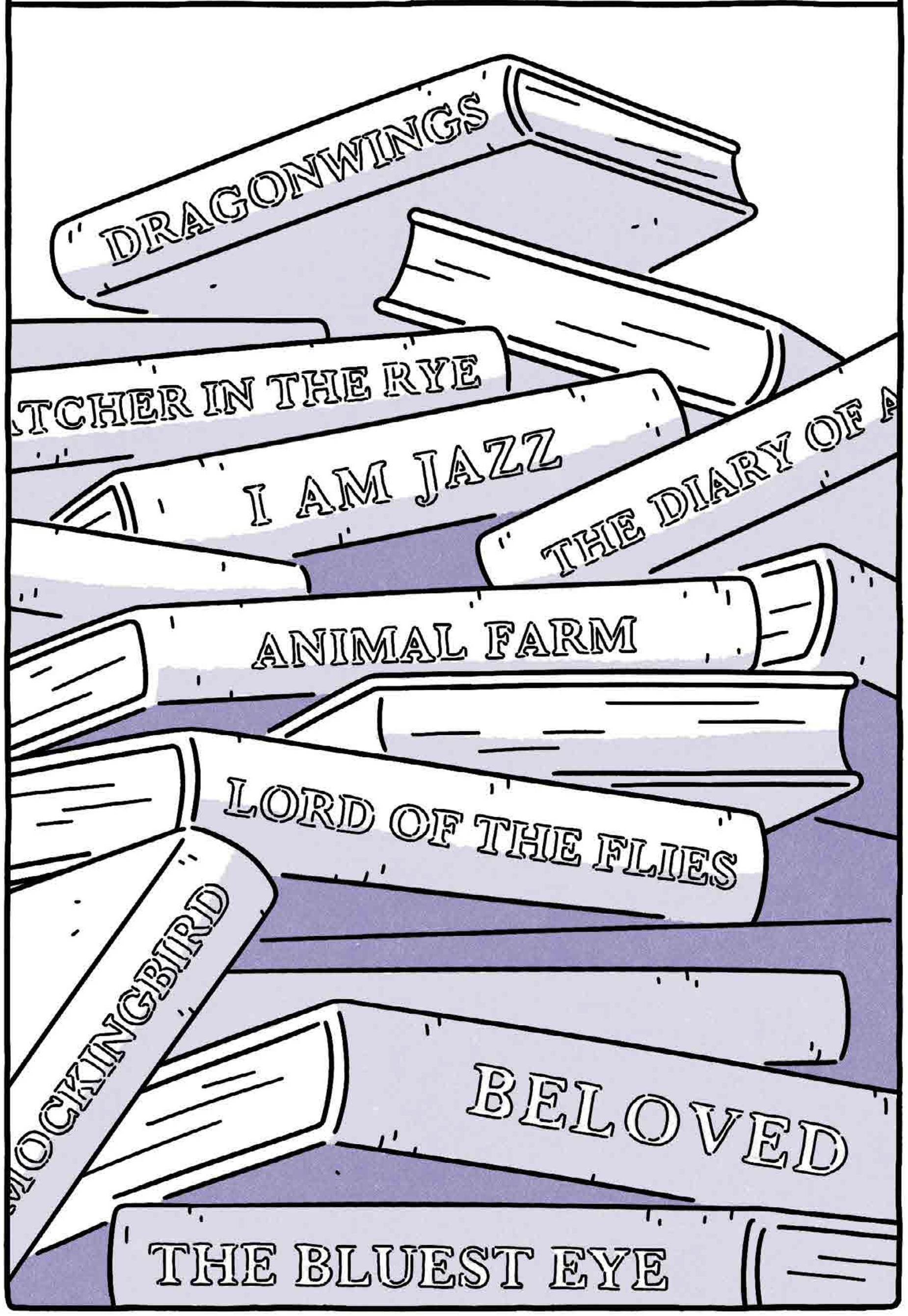
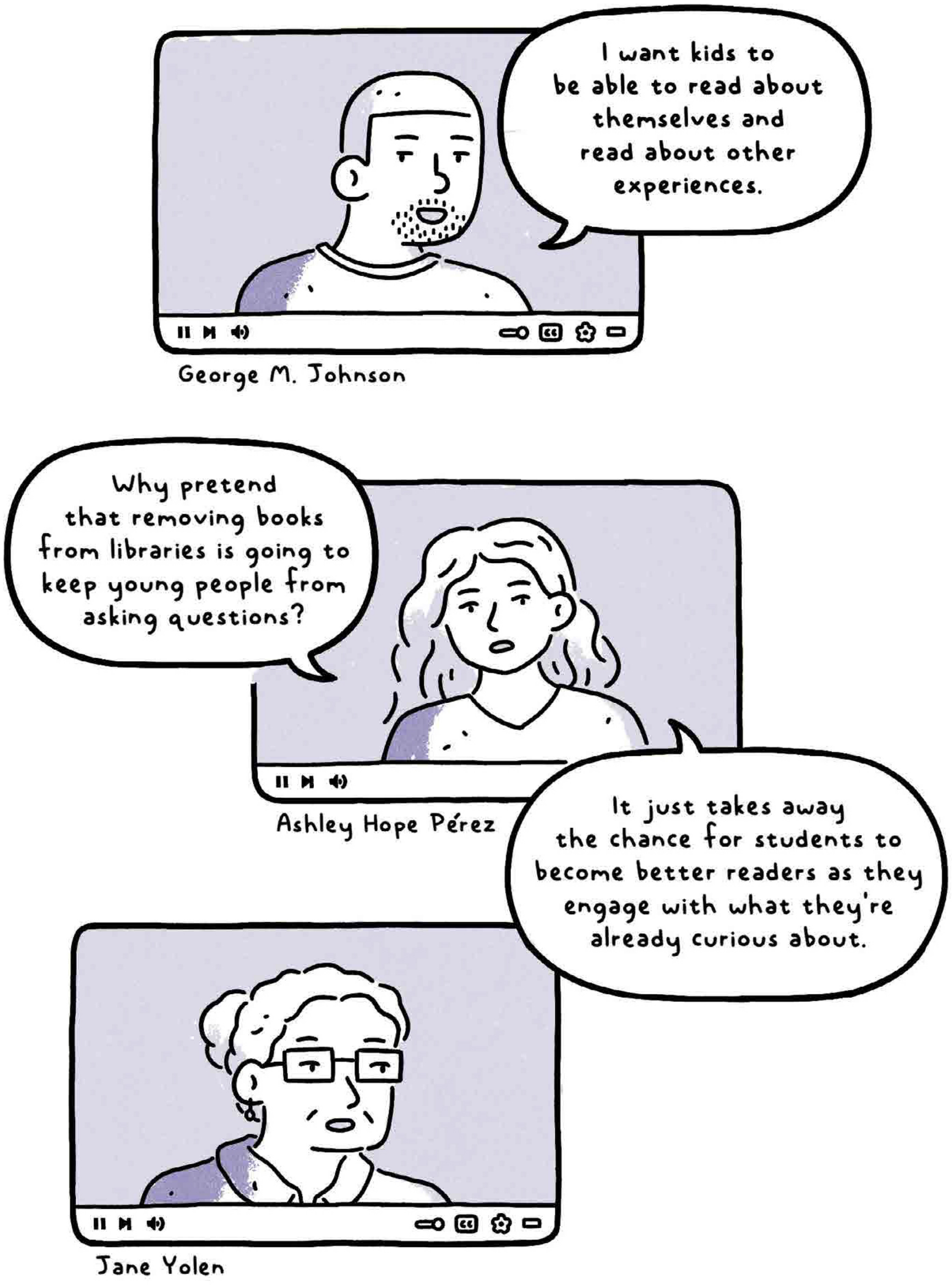
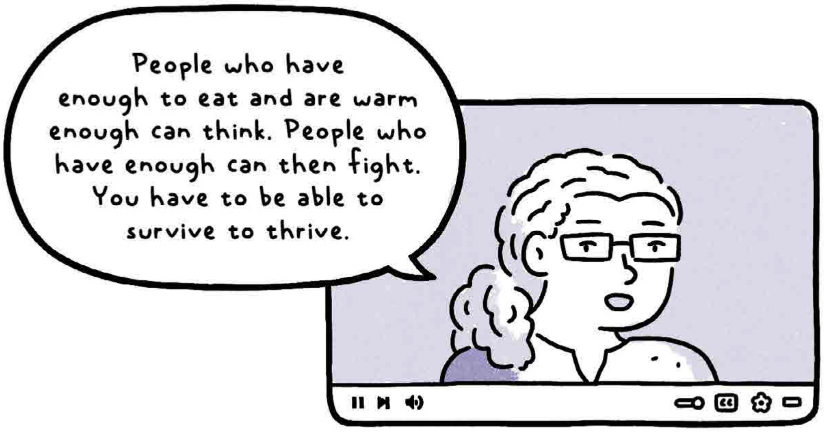
*Written by YIN, illustrated by Chris Soentpiet, published by Puffin Books, 2003

Then he discovered just how many books—beloved classics as well as important newer works—shared the same fate.

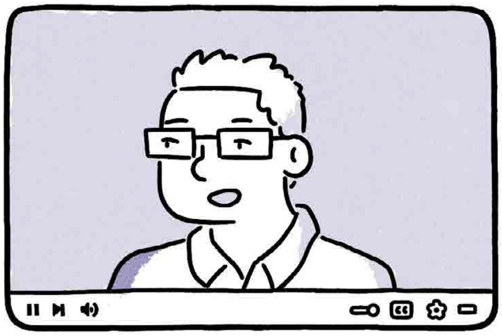

DRAGONWINGS
TCHER IN THE RYE
I AM JAZZ
THE DIARY OF A
ANIMAL FARM
LORD OF THE FLIES
MOCKINGBIRD
BELOVED
THE BLUEST EYE

To advocate for access to COOLIES and other banned, books, Christopher interviews authors, librarians, activists, and leaders on his channel.

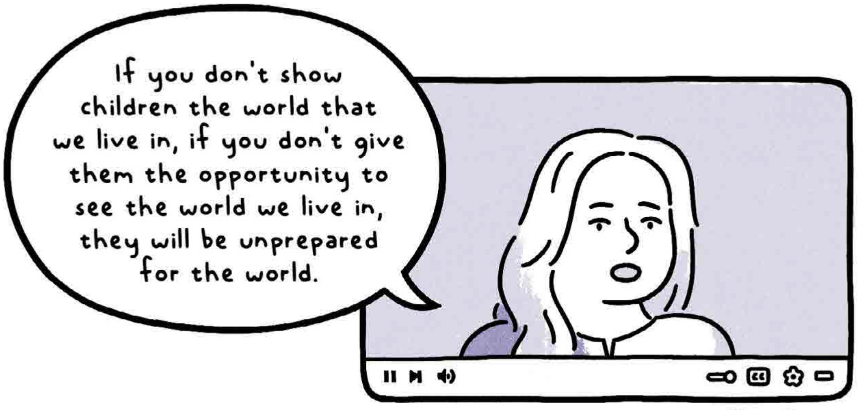

I want kids to be able to read about themselves and read about other experiences.
George M. Johnson
Why pretend that removing books from libraries is going to keep young people from asking questions?
Ashley Hope Pérez
It just takes away the chance for students to become better readers as they engage with what they're already curious about.
Jane Yolen


People who have enough to eat and are warm enough can think. People who have enough can then fight. You have to be able to survive to thrive.

Mikki Kendall



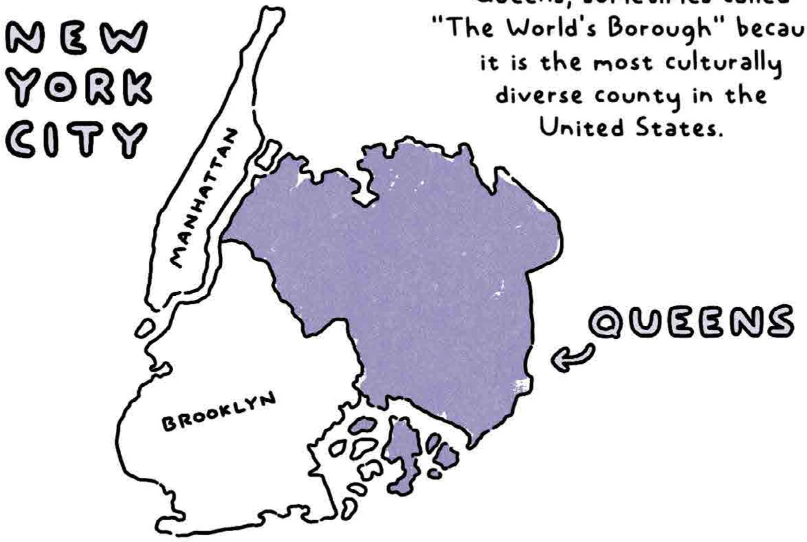
Chris Soentpiet

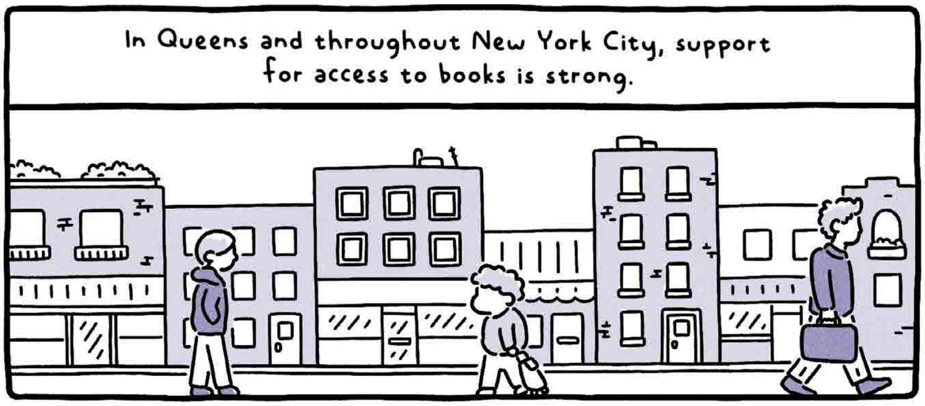

If you don't show children the world that we live in, if you don't give them the opportunity to see the world we live in, they will be unprepared for the world.

Alex Gino

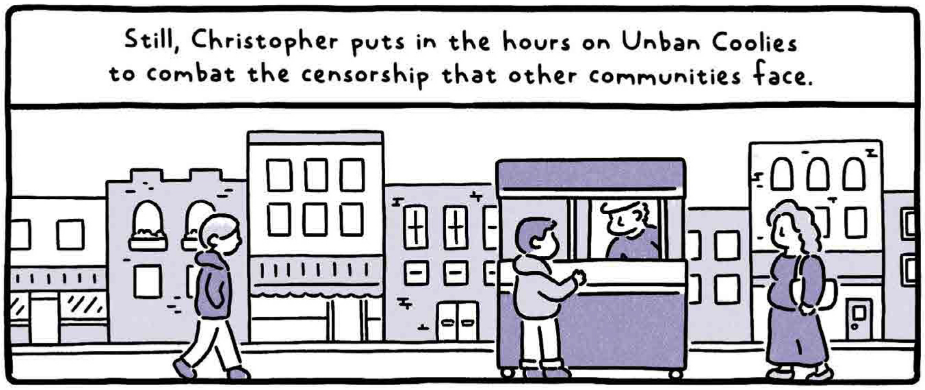
These in-depth videos collect their insights, spread the word about what is happening, and highlight what the rest of us can do about it.

Christopher lives in Queens, sometimes called "The World's Borough" because it is the most culturally diverse county in the United States.

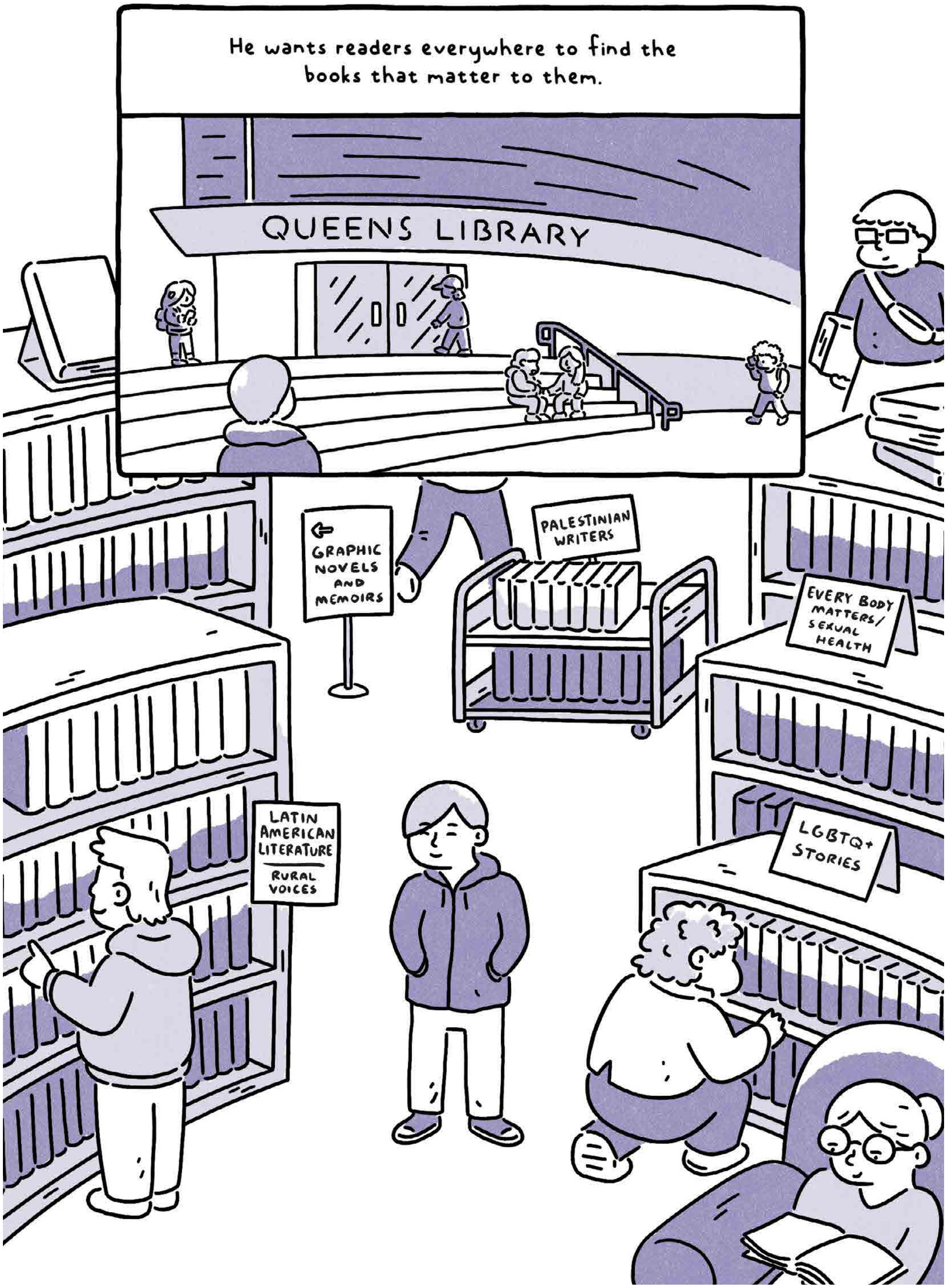

NEW YORK CITY
MANHATTAN
BROOKLYN
QUEENS

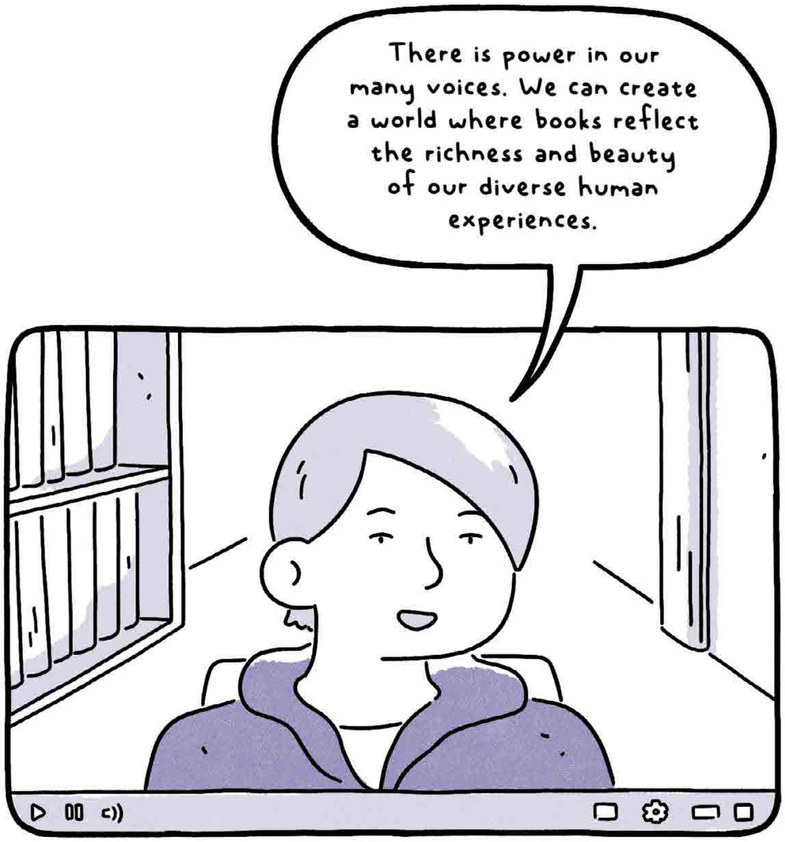


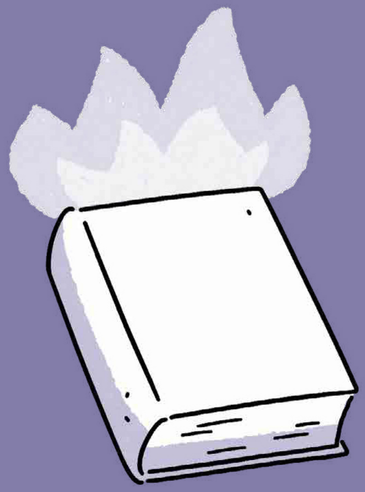
In Queens and throughout New York City, support for access to books is strong.



Still, Christopher puts in the hours on Unban Coolies to combat the censorship that other communities face.


He wants readers everywhere to find the books that matter to them.
QUEENS LIBRARY
← GRAPHIC NOVELS AND MEMOIRS
PALESTINIAN WRITERS
EVERY BODY MATTERS/ SEXUAL HEALTH
LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE
RURAL VOICES
LGBTQ+ STORIES


There is power in our many voices. We can create a world where books reflect the richness and beauty of our diverse human experiences.



PADMA VENKATRAMAN

Padma Venkatraman is the author of *Born Behind Bars*, *The Bridge Home*, *A Time to Dance*, *Climbing the Stairs,* and *Island's End,* which have earned over twenty starred reviews and sold over a quarter of a million copies. She is the winner of a Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, three South Asia Book Awards, and two Paterson Prizes, among others. Born in India, Dr. Venkatraman emigrated alone at age nineteen, and, before becoming an American citizen, directed a school in England, served as chief scientist on oceanographic vessels, and conducted research in environmental engineering.

WORD WARRIORS

BY PADMA VENKATRAMAN

Time flows around me, thick and sticky as amber around an insect's wings.

My mind petrifies in a moment that's already past. But my body is perfectly present. My chest keeps moving, sucking the bitter scent of antiseptic off the shiny hospital floor and into my nostrils. Cool air plunges through my throat, makes its way down to my lungs and up again. In. Out. In. Out.

The doctor said I'd never walk again.

Tick. Tock. My body's clock doesn't stop struggling to carry me into the future, while my eyes stare at the nurse's teal scrubs.

Teal. My favorite teacher's favorite color.

* * *

First week of junior year. Lunchtime. The cafeteria swelled with students and sound: a crowing laugh, the hiss of someone opening a soda can, the screech of chair legs dragged across the floor, the cash register's incessant clink-clank, trays thudding on tables. Worse than the echoing din, a cat-pee stench emanated from the freshly painted wall. I freed my hair from its restraining barrette and used its tip to carve letters into the paint.

"Kamala?" a stern voice said.

I turned to see a teacher—Dr. Ayana Hankerson—glaring at me through her rectangular wire-rimmed bifocals. I was used to winning staring matches, but this time I lost. My eyes fell to the flowing hem of her teal skirt, although I managed to say, defiantly, "I'm texturing the surface of this wall to reduce the noise. Smooth paint reflects sound and I think we need to drop the dangerously loud decibel level."

Any other teacher would have marched me straight to the principal's office. But Dr. Ayana Hankerson just glanced at the words I'd scratched into the wall—*Drowned in Sound*—and said, "Instead of defacing property, why don't you take my creative writing class?"

And just like that, Creative Writing appeared on my schedule.

* * *

"Kamala?" Tara's voice quavers. Her cheeks glisten.

Appa's and Amma's eyes brim with tears.

My eyes are dry.

I watch my parents and older sister from my silent abyss. Trapped in my hospital bed.

* * *

Two boys and two girls were already at their desks in Dr. Ayana Hankerson's windowless classroom when I slouched in. I wasn't thrilled to be stuck there, like the stale air, shut off from the salt-sprinkled breezes of our fading Ocean State summer, away from the honeyed sunlight of the September afternoon.

Rich Alcott's gray eyes, which always looked like a bowl of cold oatmeal, met mine for a second before he turned away. Jaheem Kimbrough, basketball star and class president, didn't bother looking my direction. One of the girls wore a green silk blouse.

I slid into a seat next to the other girl, Dawn Spears.

"This class is going to be so much fun!" Dawn whispered. I smiled back, though I didn't share her enthusiasm. We weren't friends, exactly, but we'd shared a bond since eighth grade, when Sheldon Rock had called us both dirty Indians. I'd cornered him and pinned him to the wall while Dawn lectured him on colonization, Christopher Columbus's mistakes, and the many cultural differences between the people of South Asia and the

Narragansett Nation. Dawn had already set her sights on becoming a lawyer.

I had no idea what I wanted to be. I only knew what I *wasn't.* Not tennis captain. Nowhere on the honor roll. My head was crowded with words that sang to me, but my voice couldn't hold a tune. Even my hair was wild and wavy—unlike my perfect older sister's straight, silky, shoulder-length swath of shining black.

"I'm my immigrant parents' American nightmare," I wanted to say when Dr. Ayana Hankerson asked us to introduce ourselves—but she took me by surprise, repeating my name after I said it, and asking, "Kamala? Am I pronouncing it right?"

No one had ever asked me that before.

"Nope," I said.

"Sorry," she said. "Would you correct me?"

That was another first—an apology from a teacher. And a teacher with a PhD, no less. She tried her best to correct her pronunciation, but though she never quite got it, I let it go. After all, she didn't make us call her by her full name.

"I'm Dr. Ayana Hankerson, but you may address me as Dr. H." Her tone was grander than our other teachers'. "'H' is for hearing our hearts speak through our minds, and 'H' is for hearing with your whole being when another writer shares their work. Both of which, I hope, will happen here when you write."

Dawn seemed to be drinking in each word of Dr. H's little speech. So did Rich and Jaheem. The girl in the silky blouse caught my eye and winked. Her silver necklace proclaimed her name to the world—Sarah.

Dr. H handed each of us a new notebook, not the standard-issue spiral we were used to, but one with a beautiful paisley design on the cover. Paisley! An Indian-inspired pattern. It felt like a sign—this class might be one I actually liked.

Dawn flipped open her notebook and sniffed. "New-page perfume. Love it!"

But when I opened my notebook, the white page stared at me like a hungry ghost. Unlike a blank wall, it didn't invite my rule-breaking instinct.

"Before we begin writing," Dr. H continued, "I'm going to read you one of the most powerful poems I know. So powerful that it was banned in schools in Mississippi and West Virginia in the 1970s."

That sparked my interest, but Rich raised a trembling hand. "Dr. H? I thought we were going to write in this class, not read? I write poetry and I'm—I'm scared I'll be influenced if I read too much."

"Would you tell a composer never to listen to another's music?" Dr. H asked.

Rich shook his head.

"Scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and architects build on foundations laid by others. So do writers." Dr. H's regal glance swept over us. "We may strive to emulate—not imitate—writers we love. Words are as essential to us as water. When we read, we irrigate the fields of our creativity."

With that, Dr. H began to read "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks, transporting me into another mind, another heart, another soul. By the time I returned to the buzzing fluorescence of the overhead light and the wheezing radiator, I was transformed.

* * *

Crowded around my wheelchair in my small hospital room, my classmates look like kids standing at the edge of a pool, testing the temperature of the water with their feet. Then Jaheem takes the plunge. He gets right to the point, without the usual small talk about how sorry he is or the useless questions about how I'm doing.

"We thought we might—we wondered if we could read to you?"

I shrug.

Jaheem pulls a book—*How I Discovered Poetry*—out of his backpack. "I found a poem I thought you'd like. Okay?"

I nod.

Dr. H liked to tell us that poems are like mazes to lose ourselves in and find a way out of. Yet if we felt too frustrated trying to figure out what the poet intended, she'd say, "Let's stop trying to explain," and she'd focus on how the poem made us feel. The memory of her voice fills me. "Feeling is the emotion a poem evokes in a reader, a poem's soul. Form is the way a poem looks on the page, a poem's body. Music is how a poem sounds. Rhyme, rhythm, and repetition are a poem's voice. Mind is what a poem makes you think. Its metaphors. Its symbols. Mind is a poem's thought."

Jaheem's deep voice seeps into the void in my mind, enriching it with the words of "Safe Path Through Quicksand" by Marilyn Nelson. When he reads a line about how she once hoped, as a child, that there was a hell for some people, I burst out laughing.

Jaheem stops and looks at me. Everyone looks at me. Shocked.

I'm shocked too, to discover I can still feel true happiness swirling in wisps around my rage and pain. Happiness because my friends are here, tossing me hesitant smiles, and then, at last, joining in my laughter.

* * *

In class, we all laughed when Sarah wrote an essay about six purple skunk cabbages she'd seen sticking out of the thawing ground. But when I read a passage I thought was funny—that my family was like a brilliant diamond necklace, set with one dull pebble (me)—it came out lonely and sad. No one laughed.

No one pitied me either. By then we all knew that in sharing our words, we shared our worlds, and that took courage. The recognition of courage defied and denied pity.

* * *

Hospitals are hives in which time loses itself.

I see the silhouette of Amma's bowed head by my bedside, the light of some machine I'm hooked up to outlining her with red. She's got a writing pad and a pen in her hands and she's tracing the sacred word, the holy symbol, *Om,* over and over on a piece of paper. Amma, the scientist and skeptic, now writing a prayer. Her silence breaks mine.

"Why?" My voice comes out in a hoarse whisper. Not *Why did this happen to me?* Not *Why am I trapped in this bed?* It's *Why are my parents hovering around me* now*? Why is it that they can't keep their eyes off me now that I'm lying in a hospital bed?*

Why does it take tragedy for people to wake up sometimes? I've read the notes the nurses shoved at me, from people I don't know, who say I'm a hero. Except I'm no more hero than anyone else in my class or than Dr. H. I've heard that now, finally, our community has said *enough.* But why did it take so long for some people to care about what mattered to us all along?

Fury rises and twists inside me like a flame. Amma is lucky I can't fly out of the bed and pound her with my fists. Instead, I spit words at her.

She doesn't shush me or try to soothe me. She listens.

When I'm done ranting, she's still quiet. And when she thinks I've fallen asleep, I see her reading. It's the dog-eared book Dr. H lent me. A few weeks and a whole eon ago. An anthology of short stories by Indian women I'd never heard of. She pressed it into my hands, saying, "I hope you'll love this as much as I did." I hadn't started the book yet, hadn't thought of it until now.

Nearly every book Dr. H read or recommended to us was a success. Sometimes she even brought in themed treats—like the apple pie she made for us when she read a poem from *Apple: Skin to the Core.*

Dawn loved the verses so much she asked to borrow Dr. H's copy so she could finish the book. Inspired by it, Dawn wrote a verbal tapestry woven from Narragansett and English words, which she shared with us in class.

I'd always felt ashamed of my parents' accents and the mishmash of Tamil and English they lapsed into at home. But that night, for the first time, I heard the song in Appa's and Amma's voices.

* * *

"Is that book any good?" My question is my peace offering to Amma.

“I like it,” she says warily. “Shall I read it to you?”

“Sure.”

Rich once told the class about the “mind-melt, soul-merge” he felt with the protagonists of *Flamer* and *The Magic Fish,* graphic novels Dr. H lent him.

I’m not sure I’d go that far, but the story Amma reads aloud gives me a glimpse of the girl she might once have been: a girl caught in a culture where men were valued most; a girl struggling to be recognized for her brains, not her beauty; a girl who left everyone and everything she’d known to start a new life in a strange country. I follow the story like a misty path until Amma’s lilting tone lulls me to sleep.

* * *

Parents’ right to choose! Parents’ right to choose!

The chant was coming from a small knot of parents standing by the flagpole. The wind tugged at the flimsy handmade signs they were holding. I wanted to believe that I’d misunderstood their words, that maybe they were chanting about a woman’s right to choose. The lettering on their signs wasn’t very clear, so I had to stare to make out the words.

STOP CRT INDOCTRINATION!

What was CRT anyway?

GET PORNOGRAPHY OFF OUR SHELVES!

Pornography?

SAY NO TO LIBERAL GROOMERS.

I felt a sick jolt of recognition. I’d seen parents on television, shouting about censoring books in schools. But I never thought anyone would try banning books *here.*

Whatever. I glowered at them as I marched past.

But they were back the next day. More of them, with more ridiculous signs: TRUE BLUE AMERICANS AREN’T WOKE and RED, WHITE AND BLUE AMERICANS MATTER! As I hurried toward the entrance to the school, the chant of “Get them out!” didn’t feel like it was about the books. It felt like it was about *me.*

“Are you okay?” Jaheem was waiting for me just inside the school doors.

I realized I was shivering. I almost blamed it on the chilly spring morning. But then I saw Dawn walking past the crowd and I just couldn’t lie. “They’re scaring me.”

“Me too,” he admitted as we waited for her to join us.

BIPOC kids like us had always been in the minority in our community—left out, on the margins. We’d been misunderstood. Even disrespected. But before those parents started protesting, we’d never felt like people were pointing threatening fingers straight at us. We began to walk to school together.

I wanted to yell back at the crowd. But Dawn said it was a worse insult if we ignored them. So we held our heads extra high, our backs extra straight as we strode past them, pretending we didn’t care.

I managed to rein my anger in, until the day we walked into Dr. H’s class and found the assistant principal, Mr. Gilton, in her place instead.

“Where’s Dr. H?” I asked. “Is she sick or something?”

“Concerns have been raised,” he said, “about the curriculum for this class.”

“What concerns?”

“Who raised them?”

We peppered him with questions.

Mr. Gilton shrugged. “The school board has suspended Dr. H because of activities related to her dissemination of books that should have been restricted given their content. I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say anything more.”

“In that case,” I said, “I’m afraid we’re not at liberty to *stay.* At least, I’m not.”

I marched out of the classroom without looking back. I could hear footsteps following me. I turned to see all four of my classmates in the corridor with me.

"We're going to write this wrong," I said, feeling very clever—not that anyone else would have known the way I was spelling "write"/"right" in my head.

"I—I think it's my fault," Rich whispered. "My parents think I shouldn't be—They think people like … like me … shouldn't be in books. They haven't been happy about the books I was reading. They hate that I love them so much."

"It. Is. Not. Your. Fault," Dawn said.

"Okay," Rich said.

"We have to get the school board to reverse their decision," Dawn said.

"How about we storm the principal's office first?" I suggested.

"I'm in," Rich said. His voice and his smile were shaky, but he was one step ahead of me as we strode into the administrative suite.

A dazed secretary looked up from her computer as we marched in. "Mr. Watson is not—" We were already in the principal's office before she could finish.

When Mr. Watson repeated the line about "books with questionable content," I held up a hand in protest.

"Questionable content?" I said, letting the sarcasm drip like sticky sap from my words. "You mean books that show *real* people, with *real* lives, and *real* challenges? You mean *literature*? When you call the books we care about 'questionable,' it feels personal."

Jaheem shook his head and took a step forward. "You called me a 'credit to the school' last month when I got MVP at regionals. Well, I never saw books with heroes who looked like me, before I took Dr. H's class. Thanks to her, we finally find stories made for us, by people like us, and now you want to burn those books and send her away?"

"No one said anything about burning books," the principal said.

"Oh, so you're 'just' banning them?" Dawn countered. "And getting rid of the best teacher in this school?"

"My great-grandparents were Holocaust survivors," Sarah said. "The Nazis started by banning books and they ended by burning people. Six million of my people.” Her voice cracks. “I hope you know what side of history you want to be on.”

“And we’re not going to let you fire Dr. H. Students matter, not just parents.” Rich glared at Mr. Watson.

“That’s enough, kids. Let’s not—”

We strode out before he had a chance to dismiss us.

* * *

The thought of planning a rebellion brewed fast, like spicy, strong black chai.

“We can do something about this,” Dawn said. “It’s a chance to lead a charge for change.”

“Nice alliteration.” Rich smiled.

“Let’s do some research,” Sarah said. “Phones. Laptops.”

Jaheem nodded and pointed down the athletics hall. “Gym’s empty now.”

We ducked under the bleachers and set up camp. While Dawn Googled away, finding every resource she could on fighting book bans, the rest of us listed talking points. We created a statement demanding Dr. H’s return. We said she was the best teacher we’d ever had, the only one who’d broadened and deepened our love for reading and writing. We outlined all the ways that the books she shared with us did more than entertain or instruct us, how they helped our sense of belonging and invited our empathy.

As we worked over the next days, I found out that Dr. H hadn’t just touched our lives. A whole lot of other students loved her as much as we did. Dawn’s older brother, a senior at Howard University, had majored in literature because of Dr. H, and he started a petition that got signatures from hundreds of Dr. H’s former students. Soon, we had a strong following. We pasted corny posters along the school corridors: WE’RE HANKERING FOR HANKERSON … A FOR AYANA, BEST TEACHER IN SCHOOL … AYE, AYE, DR. AYANA … LET’S HEAR IT FOR DR. H! Every day for nearly a month, rain or shine, a throng of students joined together in front of the school before the bell rang, and right after school let out. We kept it to a single chant: *Bring back Dr. H!*

* * *

“Your name is in the paper!” I’d heard Appa say those words, always with excitement, each time my sister’s achievements were celebrated in the local paper: valedictorian, first violin in the all-state orchestra, winning the national debate competition, etc., etc., etc.

But when he said those words to me, he sounded upset, not proud.

“What? Let me see!” Amma didn’t exactly sound thrilled either.

The article had a brief profile of the “protest leaders,” including me. It was a great piece—about how the five of us were fighting not only to get Dr. H reinstated, but also to protect our fundamental right to freedom of speech, including access to a wide range of ideas. There was a sidebar with some of the Supreme Court cases Sarah and Dawn had researched. The reporter quoted me, and even described me as an “eloquent speaker with a keenly literary sensibility.”

But my parents just sat there shaking their heads. “I hope this doesn’t get out of hand,” Amma said. “Or hurt your chances for good letters of recommendation,” Appa added.

The only teacher who would give me a good recommendation is the one I’m fighting to bring back, I wanted to say. *And things already are out of hand when Americans start banning books.* But I kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want them to ground me or keep me home from the next school board meeting, when we’d finally gotten them to put Dr. H’s suspension on the agenda.

My parents didn’t stop me. But they sure as hell didn’t help me get there.

* * *

I got a ride to the meeting with Sarah and her family. On the way, her parents went on and on about what an honor it was that we’d all been invited to speak. Jaheem and his parents arrived right after we did. Dawn's family was there, including her brother, who'd driven in from college and was talking with some other alumni from our school. Rich's parents were as conspicuously absent as mine, but his older brother and sister-in-law sat on either side of him, beaming.

When it was my turn to speak, I strode up to the podium and looked directly at the six school board members who were seated in a semicircle, their backs to an old brick wall, the American flag on their right and the state flag on their left. My anger steadied me somehow, and I sounded even fiercer than my peers. When I finished reading my short speech, I glanced at my phone timer and saw I still had fifty seconds. "I have one more thing to say," I said, although I didn't yet know what it was.

I looked out at the audience and I realized I wasn't just angry about Dr. H's removal or the banning of books I cared about. I was angry that Amma and Appa hadn't come, although I wasn't surprised. I couldn't count the times they'd told my sister and me, "Keep your head down if you want to climb up."

I drew in a shaky breath. "My parents are immigrants. They believe we should keep our heads down if we want to be successful here in the US. But I believe that true success comes when we climb together and build communities where everyone can lift their heads up. That's what Dr. H taught us. That's what the books you've taken away taught us. Some people want to censor stories about people like me, because they want to erase us. They think we're not true-blue American. What they don't understand is that we are true brown Americans."

As I walked back to my seat, I locked eyes with each of my classmates. Their pride was unmistakable.

* * *

Even after I'm discharged from the hospital, my parents never leave me alone. Sometimes they take turns, but one of them is always here. My anger is here too. We don't say much.

My mother is usually the one to fill the silence by reading, so I'm surprised when one morning, as they both sit in my room, my father asks if he can read this time. I just nod, and he starts reading the last story in the book of stories from Dr. H. In it, the main character's parents insist he should study engineering instead of following his heart and joining a colony of sculptors and painters who live in a little village on the Coromandel Coast. Midway through reading it, his voice chokes with tears.

"Appa?" I ask.

"It's just that it's so much like … I—*I* used to write poetry," Appa says.

"You did?" I say. "You never told me!" Amma cries. She looks as stunned as I feel.

"I fell in love with poetry in my teens," Appa continues. "I read it all the time. And I filled notebook after notebook with my own poems."

"Well, then, where were those poems when you fell for me?" my mother says. I hear the smile in her voice, but also the uncertainty. This does not belong to the story of my father she knows.

"I stopped writing them long before I met you." He smiles sadly at her. "One day, in my last year of high school, my father found one of those notebooks. When he asked me about it, I made the mistake of telling him I wanted to become a poet. He lashed me with his leather belt until my back bled. He said poetry was no profession for a real man, who needed to support a family. So I studied physics instead."

"Oh, Appa." I want to tell him that I'm sorry for the pain he must have felt. I want to say, *It's not too late, you can be a poet as well as a physicist.* But then I remember the council meeting, and the words catch in my throat.

"I'm sorry," he says, as if he can feel the direction of my thoughts. "I'm so very sorry we didn't support you. Or encourage you."

"Me too," Amma says. "It's the biggest regret of my life."

This is too big, too new.

I don't know what to do, so I just ask, "Appa, do you still have any of your poems? Will you show them to me?"

And suddenly the three of us are smiling and smiling and smiling at one another. It's the first time in as long as I can remember that I'm not even a little bit angry at them. I can almost hear Saraswati, Goddess of Learning, hovering over us, saying, “See? Books really are sacred.”

* * *

Dr. H was Christian, but books were sacred to her too. When she returned to our school in triumph, on a rainy day in May, she held up a copy of the book *Out of Darkness* as the newspaper reporters’ cameras flashed. “If each of us holds a copy of this,” she said, “we’re each holding the same thing in our hands and yet, each time we read it, we re-create the story in such a unique way that even the author could never anticipate our version of it. It’s a miracle, a miracle of reading. It’s the miracle that the young people of this school fought to uphold.”

We cheered and clapped. I kept going until my palms hurt and my throat was hoarse.

* * *

That should have been our “happily ever after” ending.

But one afternoon in early June, during the last week of classes, as Dr. H and I ambled out of school toward the parking lot, continuing the conversation we’d started in class, I noticed a man with watery blue eyes and auburn hair sitting inside a truck with an ugly banner across the side: OUR GOD, OUR GUNS, OUR KIDS, OUR COUNTRY. I didn’t pay him too much attention. After all, we’d won our battle.

Suddenly, Dr. H yelled, “Kamala!” She shoved me so hard I stumbled.

And then I heard gunshots.

Later, I would learn that the shooter didn’t live in our town, that he had seen Dr. H on an internet video, that people like him had turned her face into a target in memes, that he had driven across the state after posting a manifesto about the need to protect “true American children” from “filth.”

But in that moment, I saw only the crimson stain spreading down Dr. H’s teal blouse, before a bullet tore through my back and I passed out.

* * *

That moment is time-trapped. I could still hear those gunshots when a doctor informed me I was paralyzed from the waist down. “A bullet shattered your spine and severed your spinal cord,” she said.

Nice alliteration, I thought bitterly.

* * *

Those gunshots echo in my ears—now, in the safety of my own home.

But I also experience what’s truly present in this moment: my four soul mates, visiting me again today, with offerings of words as usual, instead of useless flowers.

Words that make tears rain down my face. Words that lead me out of the desert of tragedy and make it possible for thankfulness to burst into bloom again like a flowering cactus. Thankfulness that at least the murderer only killed one person before taking his own life. Thankfulness that I’m still here. Thankfulness that we have this time. Thankfulness that the books we fought for, that Dr. H fought for, are still in our hands.

I suppose if there is a hell, the murderer is in it. But I don’t really believe, or even want to believe, that there’s a hell out there.

I wonder if Dr. H believed in heaven. I think most Christians do, but I never got to ask her. Now I’ll never know.

One thing’s for sure, though. If Dr. H were here today, we’d agree that any God worth loving lives in the breadth and depth of experiences that books give us. Not in weapons that cause death.

And I won’t let one murderer’s bullet deprive me of whatever agency I—like anyone else in our real world—may have. *Real* agency, the ragged, ordinary kind that we piece together from what we’ve got. Not like the agency that heroes of fantasies possess when they enter magical worlds made just for them, where everyone awaits their leadership.

So I say, “Hey, Jaheem? Pass me a pen, please, and my notebook?” Jaheem smiles at me. “I wondered when you’d ask.”

Jaheem and I hold each other's gaze for a long, long moment. When I glance away, I catch Sarah winking at Dawn.

My friends pull their chairs around me. Rich flips open his laptop. Dawn sniffs her notebook before starting to write. Sarah chews on her pencil.

The four of them bend over their work. It's quiet, except for the rustle of a turning page, the clicking of fingers on a keyboard.

Sharp shards from the splintered mirror of memory will surely always pierce me. The blur of Dr. H's favorite shade of teal. The fragrance of homemade apple pie. A swath of paisley. A book we read together in class. Sights and scents that should trigger joy, but will instead threaten to shatter me. But, as Dr. H once said to us, "As artists we choose the colors with which to paint our futures."

Whenever blood-spattered images invade my mind, I'll imagine the red drops coalescing into the living river that pulses through my body. Whenever long-gone gunshots sting my ears, I'll seek poetic rhythms within me that sing of life.

Because there's one thing Dr. H said that I completely disagree with. She said that, in a way, every poem was about death. But to me, every poem, every story, is about life and hope.

So I'll write about how love makes tiny moments sparkle indefinitely. How the beauty we create in our short lives matters forever. How words can open windows into our deepest selves and onto the remotest spaces in the universe. How the only truly windowless rooms are the ones built in closed minds.

I look at my friends sitting around me, writing. Our writing circle, like all circles, has no end.

With a flourish, I write the sacred symbol *Om* on a fresh page. And I begin again.

MAKE YOUR OWN LITTLE FREE BANNED BOOKS LIBRARY

OUT OF DARKNESS
THE MAGIC FISH
THE BRIDGE HOME
WHAT GIRLS ARE MADE OF

The idea behind a Little Free Library is simple: it is a container filled with books that anyone can borrow for free.

Some people live in places where Little Free Libraries are everywhere—scattered throughout residential neighborhoods, in front of schools, by the water fountain in the park, on a shelf in a place of worship … For others, a Little Free Library is a novelty.

No matter where you are, you can increase access to banned books by including them in a Little Free Library. (LittleFreeLibrary.org even has a plaque you can order. They also provide a way to register your library and become an official Little Free Library steward.)

The classic

You are probably familiar with the classic roofed-box-on-a-post style of Little Free Library. If you’re handy with carpentry or know someone who is, you can find lots of free models online.

Creative placement

You aren't limited to the traditional model; any space available in public can work. Some enterprising teens have repurposed their lockers into banned book libraries. If you know someone with a small business, ask if they would be willing to spare a shelf or window display.

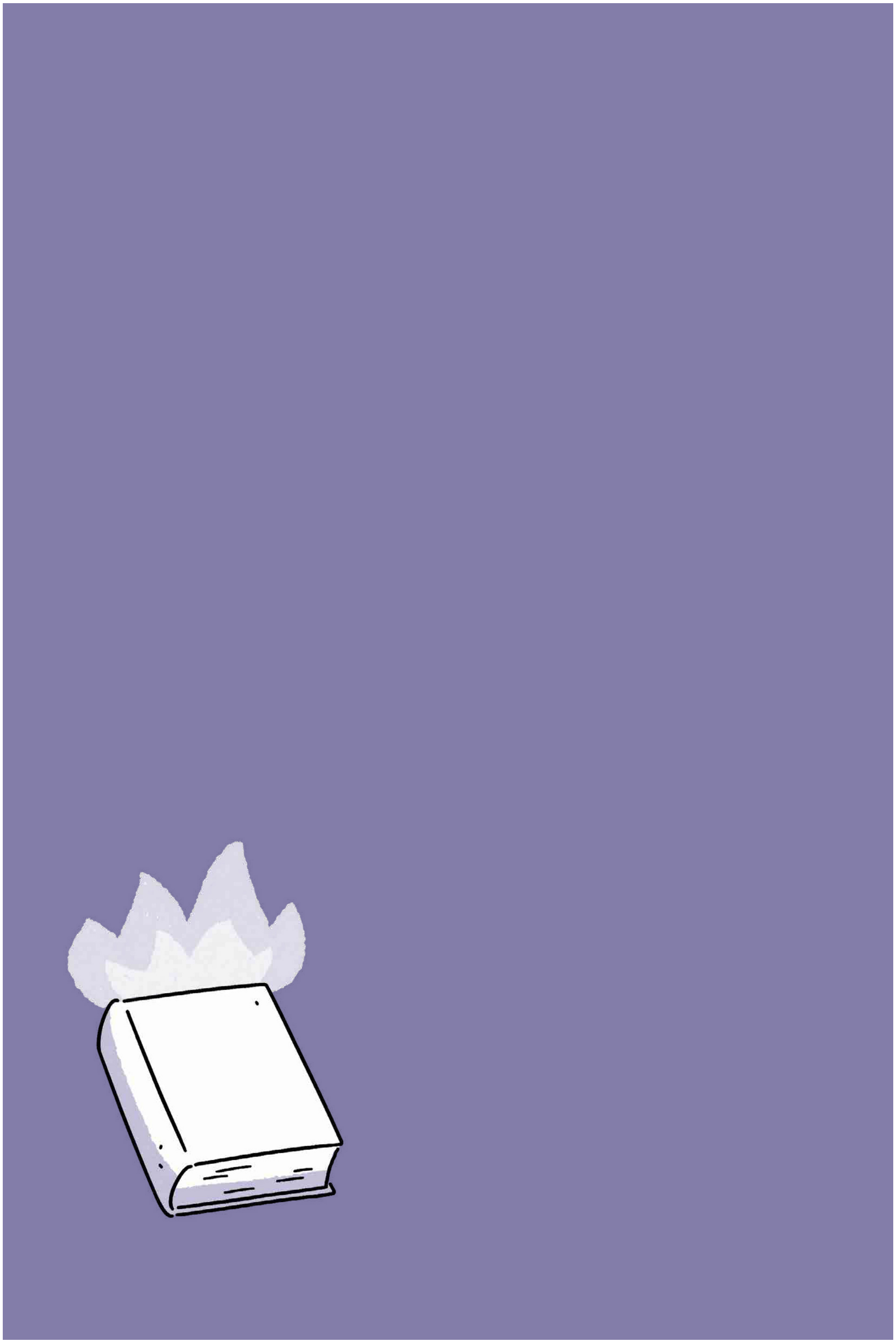
Keep it moving

Your library doesn't have to be permanent, or even stay in one location! It could be a milk crate you carry into the school cafeteria or your break room at work and then take home with you. A plastic bin with a lid is great for outdoor use, like at sporting events and parades.

Book flow

Managing the flow of books in a Little Free Library can be tricky. Some libraries need frequent restocking; others get stuffed with donations. If your goal is to highlight banned books, try to make a plan for keeping that category of books in supply—and for unloading those that don't correspond to your goal.

Organizations working to increase access to banned books might be able to help with donations for your library. A few Google searches could turn up groups and individuals fighting book bans in your area. Don't be shy about emailing with a request—empowering teens is a top priority for most folks who are active on this issue.



KELLY JENSEN

Kelly Jensen is an editor at Book Riot, where she covers all things young adult literature and censorship. She has published three critically acclaimed and award-winning anthologies on the topics of feminism, mental health, and the body. She was named a person of the year by *Publishers Weekly* and a Chicagoan of the year by the *Chicago Tribune* for her anticensorship work. She has also earned commendation from the American Association of School Librarians for her censorship coverage and was named a *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker. Before joining Book Riot, she was a public librarian for children, teens, and adults in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

OUR WHOLE RADICAL ANATOMY

BY KELLY JENSEN

It started in middle school.

My classmates and I were ushered into the school library meeting area with auditorium-style seating, the smell of processed lunch meat and dusty books and perspiration and pulsing hormones so pervasive, so oppressive we didn't even notice. It wasn't the first day that week we'd been in the room, fidgeting uncomfortably in the hard wooden seats as a series of adults stood before us to talk about puberty and s-e-x. But it was the day we learned the consequences were we to do the deed before we got married.

The instructor handed a student in the front row a white paper heart. They were instructed to tear a piece of the heart, then pass it to the person beside them. We continued tearing and passing, tearing and passing, until the last person had what little remained of the heart.

"Having sex before marriage is like letting people rip off pieces of your heart until you have nothing left," said the instructor, her athletic pants swish-swishing as she walked to the last student and held up the scrap of heart. "Imagine having no heart left to share at the altar!"

Imagine reducing the fullness of the human body to a paper-cut heart.

I already knew about sex, and it's likely everyone else around me did too. We grew up listening to Alanis Morrisette, whose music educated us about what it meant to go down on someone, what it was to "wine, dine, sixty-nine" someone. If it wasn't someone's older sibling imparting such wisdom, we picked it up in magazines like *Seventeen* or *Teen Vogue* and whispered about it at recess.

But two new things entered my life at twelve, only a year or so after those awkward "sex ed" classes: my first period and home internet. Blood in my underwear barely dried, I discovered forums like VaginaPagina on LiveJournal, which destigmatized menstruation and body hair and nipples. The community created an entire gallery of vulva selfies to showcase the array of shapes, colors, and sizes in which they came. In the bathroom, hand mirror at the ready, I learned the location and proper name for each of my anatomical features. I began a journey of seeing these parts of myself as actually belonging to my body as a whole.

Body- and sex-positive websites did more than educate me. They imprinted upon me that it was important to be truthful and raw, honest and vulnerable, even—and especially—if it made people squirm. I discovered then that to bury truth is to deny yourself and others power. It is to trade in the beauty of a living, beating heart for a paper one, ripped and folded and tattered, torn apart by others. To bury the truth is to hand your agency over to those who would deny the facts of blood, sex, pleasure, growth, and stretch marks.

* * *

But I buried my truth in college.

I wish I could say that the seeds of body positivity and self-acceptance I planted in those early years flourished in my twenties. But our journeys are not always linear. At some point, what was going on in my body became confusing and disorienting. My period would go missing for months at a time, my jeans became tighter, and I invested in a good pair of tweezers and a strong desk light to pluck the ever-increasing parade of dark hairs on my chin and jawline. On some level, I knew these differences were not just my unique body doing its unique thing. I knew from all my online reading that these symptoms were not common for women my age. Later, I would learn that these were symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), an invisible and chronic illness that impacts at least one in ten people who have a uterus.

At the time, I couldn't recognize these symptoms as my body's effort to tell me that something needed attention. Shame about having a body—shame about having *my* body—drove me to divide myself into pieces. It was so much easier to ignore my body if I pretended it was completely separate from my mind—the part of me that held my unquenchable desire to think and learn and expand and create.

I knew that my body deserved better than to be treated like something I dragged around every day. But I also knew I was one of the only people in my friend group who came to college a virgin and, several months in, remained such. One friend told me she could hardly believe it, given my great boobs—I was a reliable person she could borrow "going out" clothes from because I, like her, was fat; and she'd had sex many times before college. This piece of my story made me feel alone.

* * *

I decided to get sex over with. I could stop thinking about the experience if I just took care of it. It was only my body that would be involved, after all.

A good friend offered to be my first. He'd had plenty of experience before college and plenty more experience since. I'd already seen him naked, as he took a dare to streak across campus and I cheered, blushing, secondhand embarrassment roiling. We set a date and time, choosing my dorm room since my roommate had left school and we wouldn't need to put a sock on the doorknob. He came over, got into my bed, and I slid in, his body a big spoon to mine. It was comfortable. Comfortable enough that both of us fell asleep fully clothed for several hours.

When we woke up, he told me he couldn't do it. "I want you to have sex with someone you care about, because it can be special. Don't have it with someone like me just because you think you should."

And I would, just a few months later, on a rainy day when I skipped class. The truth was that my friend had been right. Our cuddling, not sex, was the physical affection I craved. The first time I had sex I was able to make it what I'd secretly hoped for but never let myself fully want: romantic and slow and just awkward enough to be real. Authentic.

It was not a tear in my heart. It let me feel my heart.

* * *

I didn't address the confusing physical symptoms I had in college until my thirties. Shame, embarrassment, the belief that somehow *my* body was not worth the time or effort or care, played on loop in my brain. The symptoms I experienced were only part of me, and they were the part of me I could separate from my brain. It was honestly kind of nice not having a regular period to deal with every month. In exchange, I checked my chin and wore foundation to cover those hairs before leaving my room every day. I could fix and hide those parts like they were nothing.

PCOS is common and can begin as early as the onset of puberty. For some, that's at age seven, eight, or nine. Its cornucopia of symptoms can include an inconsistent menstrual cycle, heavy and brutal menses, hirsutism (aka body hair, usually in places people feel uncomfortable with), extra body fat, rings of cysts around the ovaries, severe acne, depression, poor sleep, and difficulty getting pregnant. Doctors do not diagnose the disease with any special test but through the process of elimination. If you have the symptoms but don't have other possible hormonal issues, then you likely have PCOS.

As I came to understand what was going on in my body, I mourned all those years when I had left my body, my *self,* unsupported through disease. Everything I'd pent up inside, everything I'd told myself stories about, everything I tried to play off as unimportant, not a big deal, "just" a thing in my body—it all came pouring out. First in drips, then in waves.

Life in my body could have been so much different had I known about and addressed PCOS sooner. I could have seen myself as wholly worthy, a body and a brain operating in concert, rather than my brain offering explanations and exchanges and excuses in the service of ignoring what was happening physically. Although I treated my body as though it had nothing to do with my brain, the physical symptoms impacted my whole being, my energy, my creativity, and my mental health day in and day out.

Why didn't I have any awareness of PCOS when my symptoms began? Why do so few teens know about this common condition that could affect them or someone they care about? There is inadequate information about PCOS because so little money goes into researching it. It is a disease impacting marginalized genders, those cis and trans, and the body parts it impacts are not sexualized in our culture, even if they are routinely and aggressively legislated. We certainly did not talk about it in sex ed or health or science classes. That would require talking about the complexities of gender, sex traits, and other topics that topple the established—and false—binaries that our culture profits from.

My strategy of separating myself into parts and pieces—pieces I cared about, pieces I ignored—repeated what I saw done to women around me, whether in real life or in the media. It was *normal* to see women and their bodies criticized and dissected, objectified and consumed. No matter how successful they were, they were too fat, too crazy, too much. And if they did maintain a perfect physique, then their talent came under attack. Their career was a joke, their latest single a failure, their art seen as meaningless, trite. These impossible, unhealthy, contradictory standards set in the world around you? They climb inside you and breed.

* * *

We don't have to accept this harm as normal.

We can create stories and share information that supports understanding of each person's body as real and worth caring about. To break the silence about PCOS and other bodily experiences means deconstructing deeply entrenched ideas about gender and whose pain matters. It isn't glamorous to fight these cultural stories, but it is essential, especially for young people still learning about their bodies.

What I know now, in and about my body, I know in large part because of the bravery of strangers on the internet talking about their experiences on hormonal birth control or their night in the emergency room with cramps so intense they thought they might pass out. I felt supported by the stories of those who, like me, saw their body morphing in ways that did not make sense.

The more I learned, the more I interacted with forces for healing in the world around me, the more I came to see myself as a complex, flawed, imperfect, and fascinating whole. As I healed, I also gained resolve and purpose. I wanted to be part of this, wanted to help teens recognize the wholeness of their experience.

So I use my words. I use them to resist the limiting beliefs about bodies and selves that kept me in pain and without support for far too long. I write to shred the notion that our bodies and stories about them are fragile paper hearts that we should share as little as possible. Instead, I pass on truth: that knowledge of our bodies brings strength and healing. When we cultivate awareness, connection, and community, no one's body, no one's heart, has to be reduced to tattered paper.

* * *

The first essay I published for teens was about the first time I had sex. I shared it in *The V-Word,* a collection of true stories about virginity and what it does—or doesn't—mean to have sex for the first time. I did not think my story was all that interesting or evocative or sexy. My experience didn't match what I'd ingested in teen magazines or the stories my friends had shared (good or bad!). But in some ways, that made sharing it *more* important. My story did not need to be like other people's stories because it wasn't other people's stories. It was mine. It was one *I* experienced, and when I wrote it, I imagined what it would have meant to me, as a teen, to see that my first experience didn't have to define me. That it did not need to be something I just got over to get over. I could have instead felt supported in appreciating the “boring” delights of fumbling exploration and consent. The point of the book was to highlight just how remarkably different the first time is for everybody—and to emphasize that that difference is not only okay, it’s part of being a person.

Several years passed before I found the nerve to write about my physical health. If I could write about bodily pleasure, I wanted to be able to write about bodily pain, especially from PCOS. I knew that it mattered because in my own journey, I found medical resources limited. I connected much more with true-life experiences from the real people who navigated this tricky chronic illness. My decades living with PCOS gave me plenty to say. So I wrote about it for the anthology *Body Talk,* which included dozens of writers sharing what it is to define and experience life in the physical and political body.

May my vulnerability be a lifeline or an opportunity to grow, I thought. If even one teenager could see themselves in my words and understand that they, too, are multidimensional, irreducible to parts or pieces or singular perceptions, then I would call myself a successful writer.

The Miller Test is the three-part legal standard used to determine whether a piece of work meets the definition of “obscene.” All three parts must be satisfied in full in order to earn that label:

1. Does the average person applying contemporary community standards find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests?
2. Does the work depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law?
3. Does the work, taken as a whole, lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value?

In its scant fifty-some words, one phrase is repeated twice: “as a whole.” The idea of looking at the whole of a work—not just parts picked out or characterized by some as “dirty”—is essential. “As a whole” is the reason why none of the works targeted in schools and libraries can be legitimately characterized as “obscene.” One line or several lines or even dozens or hundreds of lines within the corpus of a book do not erase its merits or make it obscene.

Wholeness matters when we consider who books serve too. A library gathers materials for the entire body of students or residents, and everyone’s needs matter, not just the few or several or even dozens of people who would prefer for a book, or an experience, not to exist. To serve a community “as a whole” means extending care and resources to everyone in it, supporting each person’s belonging and the validity of their experiences.

In 2021, five years after it was published, *The V-Word* was challenged. Attempts to ban it then multiplied amid a broader attack on “controversial” books in schools.

The purpose of this book is to persuade teenagers to engage in promiscuous sex and also for girls to engage in lesbian sex, read one complaint.

It specifically promotes rebellion against parents’ moral values, said another.

Yet another parent proclaimed that *The V-Word* was an example of the *pornographic books making their way into school and classroom libraries.*

These misleading and narrow assumptions didn’t surprise me. I am not naive about the cultural stigma and shame around sex, nor about the willingness of extreme groups to target libraries and education to score political points. But I’d hoped that we had moved beyond the flimsy sexual education discourse that reduces people to paper hearts, that considers a normal human urge pornographic, that treats as taboo an experience connected to the existence of every person on the planet.

The people complaining about *The V-Word* obviously hadn't read it in full. If they read it at all, they'd picked passages to illustrate their arguments, rather than considering the entirety of the work and what it says about sex. These censors insist that teens do not have sex, let alone have questions about sex, because these adults fear losing control and power over young people. Their moral values hinge on partial truths and on seeing teens as their property, not human beings.

Before long, *Body Talk* was also challenged, removed, and maligned in several schools across the country. It was targeted in Collierville, Tennessee, along with virtually all other books that included "queer characters or content," a designation made by a committee within the district. Then a school board member in Wilton, New Hampshire, objected to *Body Talk* because of the way it names harms experienced by marginalized people. In her eyes, to share experiences of harm "pit[s] our kids against each other, specifically, the expression from many of the authors that the root of their problems could be traced back to white people, specifically white men." She focused on how a contributor with chronic pain in *Body Talk* described getting limited treatment because of how society and the medical establishment often turn away from the needs of patients "when they aren't white or male."

This is not an opinion. Race- and gender-based disparities in health care are well documented. But this school board member acted as if *describing* the harm, not the harm itself, was the problem. She did not want to hear about what our bodies knew. My body, by virtue of existing outside whatever norm she had in her head, was invalid. My book, meant to help people expand the conversation and create space for a spectrum of bodies, was considered dangerous for shining a light on how systems of power insist we rip ourselves into pieces to fit a box, rather than building a box that makes room for our wholeness—wholeness that matters for cis, straight, white men too.

No reading of *The V-Word* or *Body Talk* meets the definition of "obscene." Book banners simply lift portions of a story to fit their narrative, rather than looking at the work as a whole. They benefit from telling you a story about how you shouldn't tear apart your paper heart while they slide *their* scissors across it.

I won't be sliced into silence. After all, I don't write books so that lonely, bored adults can evaluate the ideas within these books through a lens of evil hatred, or disgust. I write for teenagers so that they don't.

* * *

Being a banned author is nothing to celebrate. Being a banned writer is having your life's work reduced to a count of profanities or a particular scene. It's being torn into pieces until the reader who needs you is left with nothing.

I write because I am not nothing.

It takes effort to see yourself as worthy of living. As worthy of taking up space and being respected, not in spite of but because of your uniqueness. I share my vulnerability because when I grew up and saw other people share their most intimate and vulnerable stories, I not only developed empathy for others. I cultivated self-compassion too.

Vulnerability is not weakness. It is a prowess. Likewise, growing and changing are inevitable, and neither happens in a vacuum. Being rendered little more than "vulgar" by some adults and "hateful" by others does not deter me. It galvanizes me. I fight harder.

Removing access to books doesn't change readers' human needs. They'll still be curious. They'll still experience desire, loneliness, hunger, and pain. They'll still live inside a body that is more than bones or flesh or blood. Our bodies are physical and they are political. Our bodies deserve to be known. And whatever our age, we deserve to know about our bodies, speak about them, and tell our stories from them.

Book bans do not erase our bodies.

So we push back, cultivating the power of our collective bodies and their radical anatomy. We lean harder into experiencing and sharing who we are, and we fight by continuing to show up, refusing to shut up. We reject language and actions that sever our beautiful, whole bodies—or our beautiful, whole books—into acceptable and unacceptable, dirty and clean, either/or parts and pieces. We provide supports to hold one another up when the censors' sharp blades threaten to puncture, slice, sever, or reduce.

Bodies and everything they do—eat, sleep, dream, sing, learn, seek, and make love—are not paper hearts.

I refuse to give up my dignity in exchange for someone else's comfort. Instead, with each day and with each word I write, I vow to take my body as a whole. And I'll keep inviting the teens who read my books to do that too.

NO, THAT LIBRARY BOOK IS NOT OBSCENE (INTRODUCING THE SLAPS TEST)

Book banners love to call books pornographic or obscene if they mention sex, LGBTQ+ experience, or human sexuality. But did you know that sexual content—even if it's detailed, as it sometimes is in literature—does *not* make something obscene?

In every state in the US, the definition of obscenity follows what legal gurus call the Miller Test. (Fun fact: It's called that because it comes from a Supreme Court case, *Miller v. California.*)

Here's the part of the Miller Test that applies to books:

"The work, *taken as a whole,* must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

In other words, something can have sexual content but still be appropriate (and not obscene) if it passes the "SLAPS" test. Let's make it easy to remember—how about an acrostic!

Serious
Literary
Artistic
Political or
Scientific value.

If the book has *any* of those attributes, the book cannot be "obscene." No matter how much someone doesn't like it. And this is not a test of the “value” of the part that contains sex—it’s a test of the book *as a whole.*

Librarians use professional resources that focus on materials with value when they select books; it is highly likely that any book they have purchased passes the SLAPS test. Think about books about reproductive health or anatomy. Naked people? Check. Serious scientific value? Check. Novels and poetry explore human experiences, including gender and sexuality. Serious literary value? Check.

Book banners’ claims about library books are often based on one scene that they refuse to consider in the context of the whole. And those claims just don’t hold up to the Miller Test’s SLAPS.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR HATE MAIL

BY ASHLEY HOPE PEREZ

Nasty comments have a way of getting stuck in your head.

Yes, I know that the garbage I get as a banned author has little to do with me or what I've written—it's obvious that the people sending me hate mail haven't read my books.

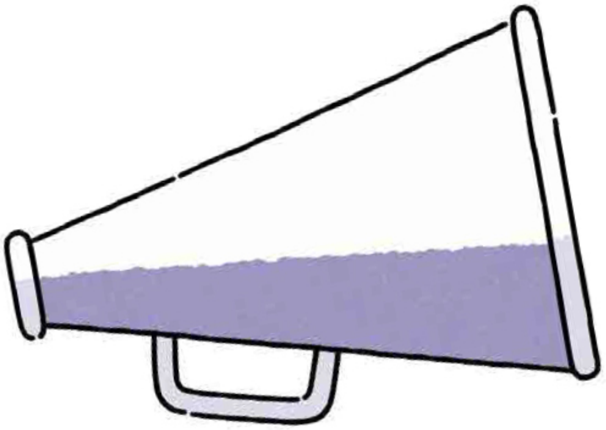
So why do I care? Why do these words eat at me? Why can't I remember fan mail half as clearly as the slime that coats my inbox?

Our brains are wired to hold on to negative information. It's an evolutionary adaptation left over from when it was more important to remember that cobras could kill us than that the sunset was beautiful. It was a matter of survival.

But we don't have to give words the power to wound us. When I get hit with hate mail, I prefer to make something new from it. Turning ugly messages into a resource for my creativity drains them of venom. I reclaim my imagination, and most importantly, after I've refashioned them, I can finally stop thinking about them.

We all have bits of unwelcome slime in our lives. The next time you receive a harsh message or a rude comment, give this a try. Play with it, transform it, talk back to it. Cross things out. Write or draw in the spaces between the words. Copy it in silly handwriting. Make it ridiculous. Cut it up and put it back together in a new way.

Keep going until you are laughing, crying, or surprising yourself—and notice if you feel different afterward.



SPIRITUAL ADVICE ZONE

What is wrong with you? You are truly helping to further the satanic agenda in our world.

Wow, who knew I was so powerful?

You are a very sick woman. How dare you mess with God.

So it's "messing with God" to write a book about love, courage, and friendship in the face of hatred?

May God judge you. I certainly have.

So not WWJD.

You are vile & evil

Hey! Looks like you enjoy word scrambles! You forgot "live"!

YOU ARE LITERALLY SATAN

LITERALLY... except not.

PERSONAL ATTACKS

Nothing says "moral authority"
like insults and threats ☺

At least the photo with your bio isn't bad to look at, but the hair needs work. Next time lend your glasses to the hairdresser.

You don't like my hair?
Oh, right, I don't care!

Your husband should shut you up.

I guess spreading lies on TV is how you spend your time when you're not writing porn. Your face disgusts me.

So people who would write
these ugly messages think
I am the one with messed-up
values? THAT'S funny.

Your books are getting banned just like they should. We don't want them near our kids. We don't want you near them. You should be locked up, liberal scumbag.

FUN WITH GRAMMAR + SPELLING

This so
called book
only perpuates
violence
and hate

fun
new word?

"your" vs "you're"
-very tricky!

Your a nasty
peace of work,
can't believe you
call yourself a
writer. I hope you
get fired or die,
you sick beast

"Nasty Peace"
is a pretty good
band name...

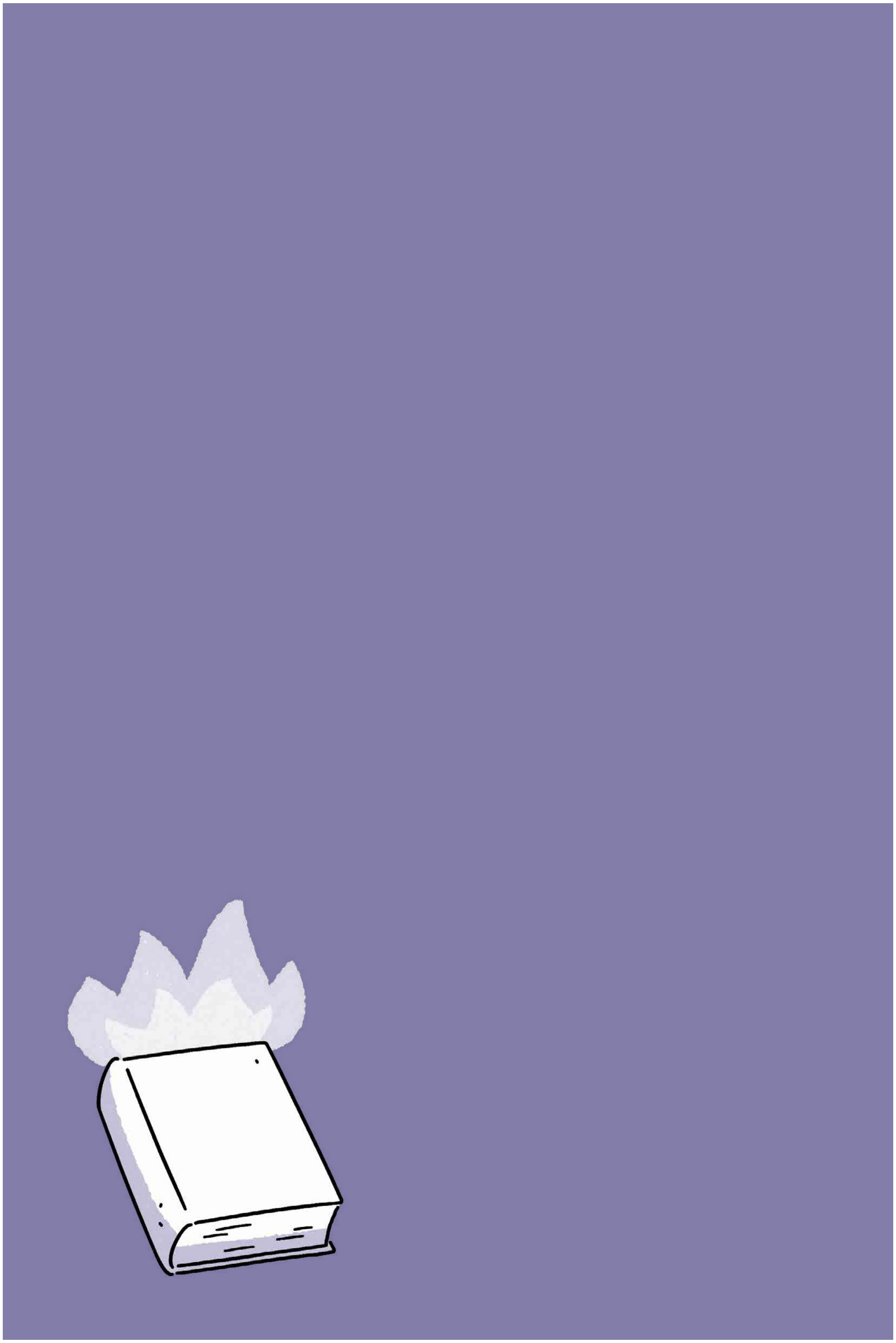
Woman you pipe
down we will burn
your books stop
twisting minds its
pornographic filth
and you know it

maybe the
punctuation
keys are broken?

BONUS!!

I don't think I will be able to
eat for the rest of the day
after seeing the filth being
allowed in our schools
because of the likes of you.
Our poor children.

Look! It's the Moms for
Liberty diet plan!



ELLEN HOPKINS

Ellen Hopkins is a poet, a former freelance journalist, and the award-winning author of twenty nonfiction books for children, four novels for adult readers, two middle grade novels in verse, and fourteen bestselling young adult verse novels. Her latest young adult novel is *Sync.* After six decades in the US West, Ellen recently moved with her extended family to five acres of Missouri woods.

IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE

BY ELLEN HOPKINS

Writers are blessed (and cursed) with "What If" Syndrome. We see or hear or read something and our brains click into gear. Ooh, think about that … I wonder … What if…? It's where our best stories are born. But it can be the source of our worst nightmares too.

Throughout the current wave of book-banning hysteria, I've experienced several bouts of "What If." One of them erupted recently, when I happened upon a favorite photo of my adoptive mom, who passed away in 1987. In many ways, my mom was a product of her generation. Born in 1912, she came of age during World War II, when women were valued in the workplace yet expected to return to their hearths once their soldiers came home.

Mama was artistic, with a thirst for knowledge. One of her greatest regrets was her inability to graduate from college and have a career. But within the confines of the home, she passed on the gift of literature to me and my little brother. She read aloud to us every evening and had me reading chapter books on my own before I started kindergarten. One of my earliest memories is coasting toward sleep as Mama read us *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist.* My adoptive dad was thirty years older, and my parents were worlds apart from each other in many ways, but one thing they agreed on was the value of books and reading.

As I looked at my mom's picture, it struck me: What if I had been adopted by Moms for Liberty (M4L)–type parents? The M4L organization has orchestrated many of the recent book removal efforts. M4L was originally founded in Florida, grew out of opposition to COVID-19 regulations, and has spread across the country. According to their website, they are "dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government."

Their activities do not reflect that description. In fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated them a hate group: "Moms for Liberty and its nationwide chapters combat what they consider the 'woke indoctrination' of children by advocating for book bans in school libraries and endorsing candidates for public office that align with the group's views. They also use their multiple social media platforms to target teachers and school officials, advocate for the abolition of the Department of Education, advance a conspiracy propaganda, and spread hateful imagery and rhetoric against the LGBTQ community."

So when I consider the "What If" of being raised by such people, it's hard to imagine a childhood anything like mine. This short piece of fiction-in-verse begins here.

TO OPEN

Phoebe Grantham dials the phone,
struggles to untangle the cord
which has become kinked
and crooked from her obsessive fiddling.
She waits for Jonathan's secretary to answer.

Mr. Grantham's office. May I help you?

"It's Phoebe. May I please
speak with my husband?"

It takes too long, and when
he finally answers, he sounds
annoyed. *What is it, Phoebe?*

"Dr. Bishop called. The girl
is in labor. He says it could be hours,
but to expect the birth today."

If there's no hurry, I'll go ahead
and take my afternoon meetings.
We have some very big things
happening here at RCA, as you know.

"Of course. Hopefully by the time
you get home we'll have a baby."
Phoebe replaces the handset,
then fixes herself a martini.

She passes the housekeeper
in the hall. "Catalina, please straighten up
the nursery. The baby will be here soon."

Wonderful, missus. Are you excited?

I need a two-martini lunch, thinks
Phoebe, but she says, "Oh, yes. Very."

It was Jonathan who wanted a baby,
someone to will his growing fortune to.
Phoebe would prefer he just leave it to her,
but even a 1950s wife can't be so blunt.
Regardless, stretch marks, morning
sickness, and excruciating heir expulsion
were not in her game plan.

A friend of a friend knew a doctor who,
for a not-small fee, provided Phoebe
with a diaphragm, the necessary protection.
Jonathan remained clueless, and after
three years finally accepted the “fact”
that his beautiful wife was infertile.
An adoption was arranged.

Phoebe shuffles barefoot across the white
carpet, past white walls, into the white-tiled
kitchen that wears a faint perfume of bleach.
She pours a double, stands at the streak-free
window, watching the gardener tend
the roses just starting to bloom outside.

It’s a warm spring day, and as James
weeds, a sheen of sweat glistens
on his brown skin. His thin cotton
shirt barely conceals muscles
well built by labor and so unlike
Jonathan’s pasty corpulence.
Phoebe’s embarrassed
to find herself a little breathless.

She drains her martini, returns
to the living room, plunks down
on the white sofa and picks up
the latest copy of *Look* magazine.
On the cover are Judy Garland
and Bing Crosby. She reads the story
about the movie awards, skips the one
about a wave of terror threatening the South.
Phoebe’s heard enough about the uprisings.

California isn’t immune to racial
strife, but its clashes tend to be more subtle.
Back when Phoebe’s father
joined up with the Orange County
KKK, many of his hooded brethren
were local politicians, cops, and, like
himself, respected businessmen.

Their main concern was Catholicism.
Nothing like this school desegregation.

Phoebe jumps at the telephone’s chime.
Is it *the* call?
No. Just her friend Daphne.

Any news?

“Not yet. But soon.”

The mother’s so young.
I hope everything goes okay.

“She’s almost seventeen.
Lots of girls that age have babies.”

Can you imagine?

“At sixteen, I thought kissing
a boy would send me to hell.”

Daphne laughs. *You, a prude?*

Phoebe pictures James.
“Maybe in those days.
Anyway, I’d better go.

I’m waiting for the call.”

It comes a couple of hours later,
just as she hears Jonathan
pull up in the driveway.

Dr. Bishop here, Phoebe. It’s a girl.
Seven pounds, nine ounces.
She seems perfectly healthy.
Protocol dictates twenty-four
hours of observation. Come for her tomorrow.

Phoebe doesn’t ask about
the mother.
That’s not her concern.

A boy would be easier
in the long run, she thinks.
But dressing a girl up will be fun.

FAST-FORWARD ONE MONTH

Baby Mary rouses from her nap.
Yes, her name is Mary. It happens
to be the year’s most popular moniker,
and Phoebe is anything but creative.

Oh, you’re awake. I bet you’re wet.

Hands perfumed with Ivory soap
unsnap the plastic pants that keep
Mary’s clothes and crib sheets dry
when her cloth diaper dampens.

Mary had a little lamb,
little lamb, *little lamb* …

Phoebe is unaware
that Mary, only four weeks old,
already responds to the gentle voice
of her nanny, Deborah.

Mary knows
Mama doesn’t do diapers.
Mama doesn’t sing.
Mama doesn’t smell of soap.

Her scent is sharper, and when
it’s strongest, after some drinks,
her words melt together,
barely words at all.

“I have company coming,”
Phoebe says to Deborah.
“Please dress my Mary doll
in the clothing I’ve laid out.
We’ll be in the living room.”

Pink frock.
Pink bows.
Pink patent leather shoes.

Mary indeed looks like a doll
when Deborah brings her to Phoebe,
who’s turned on daytime television.

Search for Tomorrow? asks the nanny.

Phoebe nods. “Guilty.

Don’t you dare tell Jonathan.”

No, ma’am. It’s our little secret.
When will your guests arrive?
You should probably feed Miss Mary first.

“Would you see to that?
And don’t forget the bib.
That dress cost a small fortune.
I’d hate for her to spit up on it.”

Do you want to hold her
while I fix her bottle?

“I’d rather she not
spit up on me, either.”

Oh, Phoebe tried playing dedicated mommy.
The experiment lasted a week or so.
Then she remembered
why nannies were invented.

Guilt prickles at her skin.
Wife. Mother.

Careers are for women who
can’t find husbands, her father insisted.

Just be sure to marry well,
her mother advised.

The doorbell rings, and Phoebe switches
off the television. She goes to the door,
exchanges pleasantries with Daphne
and her sister, Jenny. “Martinis?”

Oh, I shouldn't, demurs Jenny.

Make mine a double, says Daphne.

Phoebe goes to the bar, pours
three strong drinks. Jenny
doesn't turn hers down.

When are we going to see
that baby? Daphne inquires.

"She'll be along.
The nanny's feeding her now."

Did you meet her mother?

"I'm her mother."

You know what I mean.
The biological one.

Phoebe shakes her head.
"It's better this way, they say.
But we know she's of French
descent, and a gifted student."

What about the father? asks Jenny.

Does the mother even know
who he is? Sometimes girls like that—

Phoebe knows what she means.
"We've been assured the father
is Caucasian, and of sound mind.
Oh, here comes my Mary doll now."

Deborah has made certain both
the dress and baby’s face are spotless.
She hands Mary over, and Phoebe passes
her around so her friends can see
that her daughter is absolutely perfect.

FAST-FORWARD FIVE YEARS

Phoebe has watched her daughter
grow with varying degrees
of morbid interest and vexation.
Mostly vexation.
She’d always assumed all children
were easily molded. She had been, at least.
But Mary has a mind of her own.

Phoebe’s white carpets need regular
cleaning, as Mary prefers
stomping through puddles and
digging for earthworms
to playing with the beautiful dolls
her mother has purchased.
No amount of scolding
can convince her otherwise.

Mary is affectionate, but doesn’t
want to snuggle. This is much like
Phoebe herself—perhaps it’s
something taught rather than inherited.
She’s a curious child, and her
questions seem simple …
until Phoebe tries to answer them.

How big is the sky?
What color is water?
How long is forever?
Where does time go when it's gone?

The last stumped Phoebe
until she remembered an evening
when Jonathan had arrived home late.
Mary was coloring while Phoebe
watched *To Tell the Truth.*

"It's almost eight," Phoebe complained.

Is it? mused Jonathan. *Sometimes I lose*
track of where the time has gone.

Time goes where it will,
at a steady pace. There's no way
to brake or accelerate it,
though from time to time

Phoebe would like to do both.
It would be nice to slow
the deepening crow's-feet,
but the parenting could go faster.

For some odd reason,
Mary is enamored with animals.
She has begged for a puppy. Kitten.
Canary. Anything with fur or feathers,
destined to throw dander into the air.
Lassie is her favorite TV show.
Right up there with *Fury.*

Jonathan, when he's home,
cannot resist the girl.
Since Phoebe will not allow
animals in their home, he takes it
upon himself to get riding lessons
for Mary. He says the child's a natural.

He encourages her ambition.
Indulges her. And so does a string
of nannies. Which is why
they don't last long.
The newest, Pamela, finds
Phoebe in the kitchen.

Mary seems conflicted about
her first day of kindergarten.

"Why? She knows every word
in those Dick and Jane books."
The only books Phoebe allows her.
None of that Dr. Seuss nonsense.

It was almost scary how fast
Mary picked up reading.
And she taught herself simple
addition by counting marbles.

It isn't about that. She says
there might be doctors there.

"Doctors?"

She went on and on about needles
and polio and how she isn't a guinea

pig for some experiment.

Phoebe flushes. She might
have said something like that
to Daphne. *My daughter*
is an eavesdropper! she thinks.

Do you need me to drive her
to school? Pamela asks.

"No. I want to meet her teacher.
But please make her lunch.
I don't trust cafeteria food."

Phoebe spends a long time
choosing her outfit and putting
on makeup. She wants to look
serious, but not too matronly.
When she's satisfied, she finds
Mary fuming by the front door.

We'll be late.

Indeed, Phoebe ushers Mary
into class ten minutes after the bell.
She rotates her head slowly,
assessing both teacher and kids,
and their pale complexions,
assuring herself that this
neighborhood school is in fact
the right place for her Mary.

Welcome. I'm Mrs. Simmons.
And ... she studies her class list.

This must be Mary Grantham?
Why don't you join our circle?

Okay, Mama. You can go now.

"Are you sure, Mary?"

Yep.

Phoebe's a bit taken aback.
Mary has settled easily into
this ring of strangers, and instructed
her mother to leave.

Almost as if she might prefer
their company to hers.

FAST-FORWARD SEVEN YEARS

Phoebe and Daphne sit at a table
in the newly opened Blue Bayou.
It's Disneyland's first fine-dining
restaurant, and reservations are impossible.
Jonathan's connections got them in.

You're sure the kids are okay
on their own in the park? asks Daphne.

Phoebe nods. "They'll be fine."

Today is Mary's twelfth birthday.
All she wanted—besides a horse—
was a day at the park with a couple
of friends. Well, first she asked to go

to the natural history museum.
But Phoebe nixed that quickly.
“Do you want to bore your friends to death?”

She didn’t okay the horse, either.

School’s going well for Mary?

“Straight As all the way.
Her teacher gushes about her.”

The same teacher who handed
Mary a copy of *Gone with the Wind.*
Despite Phoebe’s collection of
Harlequins, she will not tolerate
her preadolescent daughter filling
her head with lust.

Mary complained when
Phoebe took the book away.

But this is good! Scarlett’s so
strong! I want to be just like her!

Unmanageable. Unmarriageable.
Phoebe just tsked.

“I am a little worried about Mary
starting junior high next year,”
Phoebe admits to Daphne.

You’re sending her to a private
academy, aren’t you?

“Yes, but not the all-girls

school I’d prefer. She flat refuses
to go there, and Jonathan always
takes up for her. So there will be
boys to worry about.”

Among other things. Anyone who
can afford the tuition can send
their kids, regardless of race or religion.

You’ve had “the talk” with
her, haven’t you?

“Of course not. No use putting
ideas into her head!”

Hasn’t she ever asked
where babies come from?

“I told her they grow inside
their mommies’ tummies.”

And that was it?
Phoebe, honestly, at some point—

“We’ll cross that bridge
when we absolutely must.”

Phoebe has no clue
that Mary has already asked
more-informed (though not
always accurately informed)
friends about the details.

Daphne rolls her eyes.
But she’ll get her monthly

visitor soon, won't she?

"I don't know about 'soon,'
but I'll have the necessary items
when it happens. Can you believe
her school sent home a permission
slip for a sex education class?"

I don't suppose you signed it?

"Jonathan almost did, but I put
my foot down. That is not
something a stranger should teach,
and that's what I told the principal!"

The two women quiet as a waitress
delivers their salads. They eat in
silence for a couple of minutes.

Speaking of Jonathan, how
are you two getting along?

Daphne knows the two of them argue
about everything, from what to have
for dinner to what to watch on TV.
It doesn't help that Mary
would just as soon nibble pizza
while devouring a book.
And Jonathan would let her.

Phoebe thinks it's bizarre.
What kind of kid would rather
read than watch TV?

And when she does tune in to

the television, it’s usually to watch
the news. She wants to know
about the civil rights movement
and the Vietnam demonstrations.

Phoebe leaves the room
when Walter Cronkite comes on.
She doesn’t need to hear about
hippies or Martin Luther King Jr.
All these protests!
What are they complaining about?

Mary wants to know the answer
to that question, but even if Phoebe
had it, she’d keep it to herself.

Besides, she has a sinking feeling
that Mary will get the information
she craves at school.

Or from books …

* * *

And that’s where my “What If” ends. I have a natural curiosity about people, in all their naked glory and shame. People are yesterday. People are now. People are tomorrow. I’ve always looked to books for an understanding of the human condition, and I’m not sure a different upbringing could have quashed that desire.

Well into my adulthood, I found my biological mom. It turns out that she wrote poetry for most of her life. In fact, our first contact was an exchange of poems. Hers was about giving up a baby for adoption. Mine was about being that baby. My bio mom gifted me with a love for words that my adoptive mom encouraged. How fortunate I was that nature and nurture worked in concert, rather than opposition.

When I was a kid, racial and religious disparities were focal issues, as was the war machine. Young people marched and chanted and protested to right the wrongs they recognized in our society. That trend continues today, as our youth seek to balance the scales with regard to gender, sexual identity, race, and wealth distribution. What's at stake is power. The power to create a more equitable future.

Power is also behind those who oppose education. The power to silence. The power to erase. Book banners seek to eliminate the stories (and maybe the people they represent) they disagree with, erasing them from school libraries and the public space as well.

Knowledge is power. And that is what they fear. Regardless of your upbringing, of where you live, or how you're otherwise pigeon-holed, you'll find the knowledge you need in books.

I don't want to imagine a future without them.

ANTHOLOGIES BOOK BANNERS DON'T WANT YOU TO READ

These powerful collections have been challenged and banned in recent years. Read for yourself!

Body Talk: 37 Voices Explore Our Radical Anatomy, edited by Kelly Jensen. Contributors include Alex Gino, I. W. Gregorio, Anna-Marie McLemore, Junauda Petrus-Nasah, and Alice Wong.

The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them, by the Freedom Writers, with Erin Gruwell.

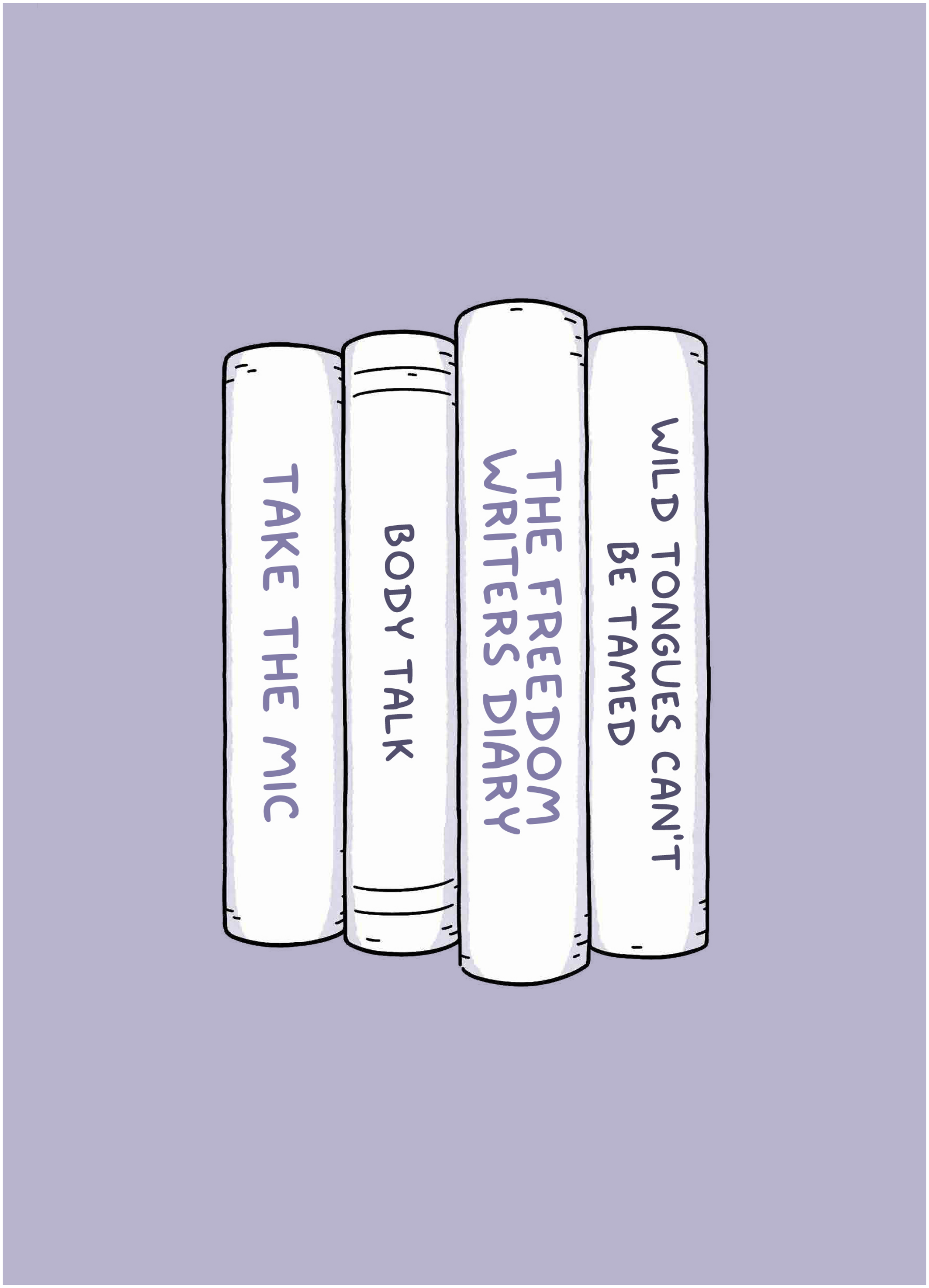
Hope Nation: YA Authors Share Personal Moments of Inspiration, edited by Rose Brock. Contributors include Angie Thomas, Julie Murphy, Marie Lu, Nicola Yoon, David Levithan, Libba Bray, Renée Ahdieh, Christina Diaz Gonzalez, Aisha Saeed, and Brendan Kiely.

Take the Mic: Fictional Stories of Everyday Resistance, edited by Bethany C. Morrow. Contributors include Samira Ahmed, Jason Reynolds, Darcie Little Badger, Keah Brown, Laura Silverman, L. D. Lewis, Sofia Quintero, Ray Stoeve, Yamile Saied Méndez, and Connie Sun.

Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: 15 Voices from the Latinx Diaspora, edited by Saraciea J. Fennell. Contributors include Elizabeth Acevedo, Naima Coster, Natasha Diaz, Kahlil

Haywood, Zakiya N. Jamal, Janel Martinez, Jasminne Mendez, Meg Medina, Mark Oshiro, Lilliam Rivera, and Ibi Zoboi.

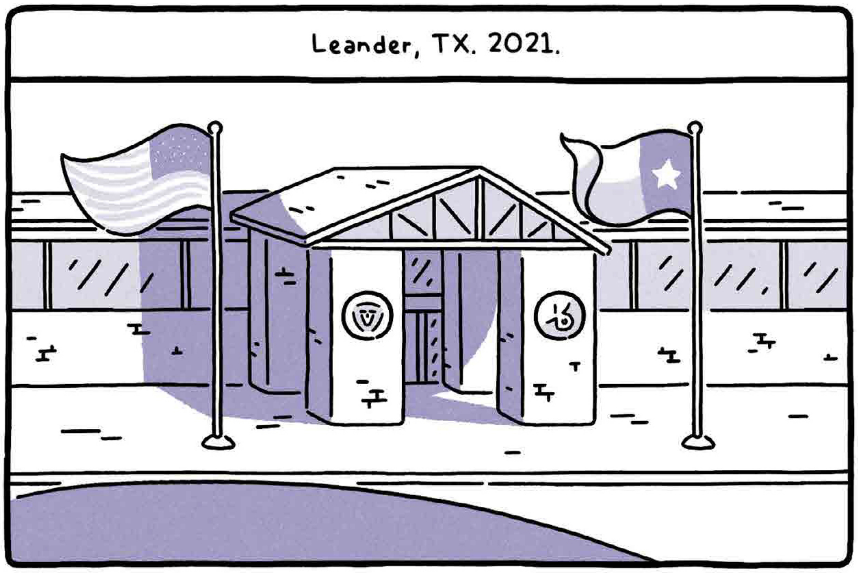
You Too?: 25 Voices Share Their #MeToo Stories, **edited by Janet Gurtler. Contributors include Beth Revis, Mackenzi Lee, Ellen Hopkins, Saundra Mitchell, and Jennifer Brown.**


TAKE THE MIC
BODY TALK
THE FREEDOM WRITERS DIARY
WILD TONGUES CAN'T BE TAMED

UNSTOPPABLE READERS

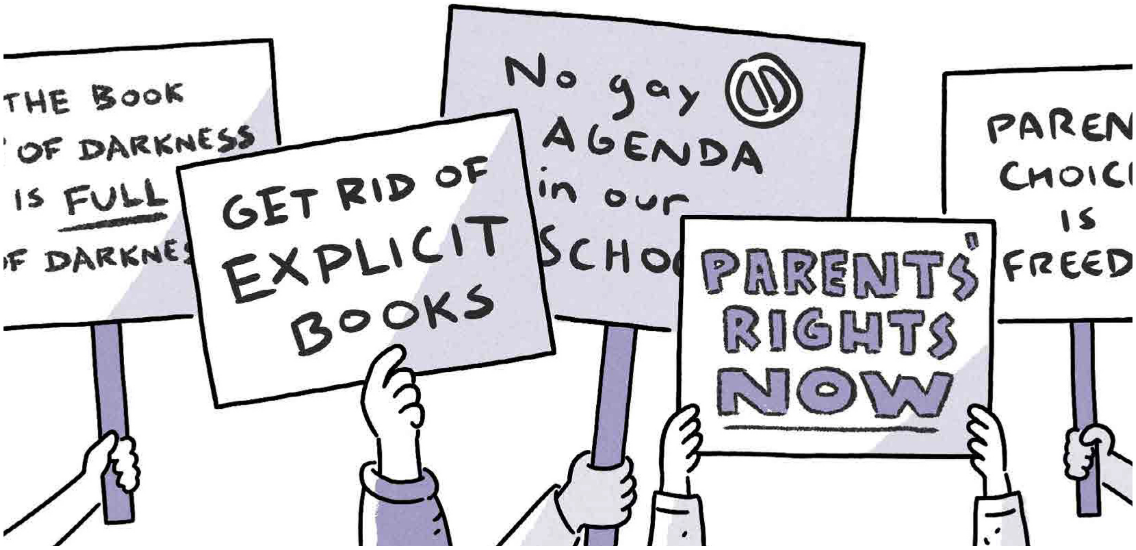
THE VANDEGRIFT BANNED BOOK CLUB

By Ashley Hope Pérez and Debbie Fong

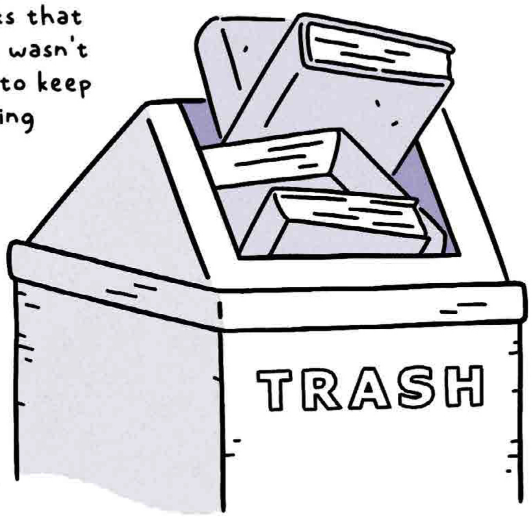


Leander, TX. 2021.

When Ella Scott and Alyssa Hoy were in their first year at Vandegrift High School, a small but active group of parents started agitating to have dozens of titles removed from the high school choice reading list.

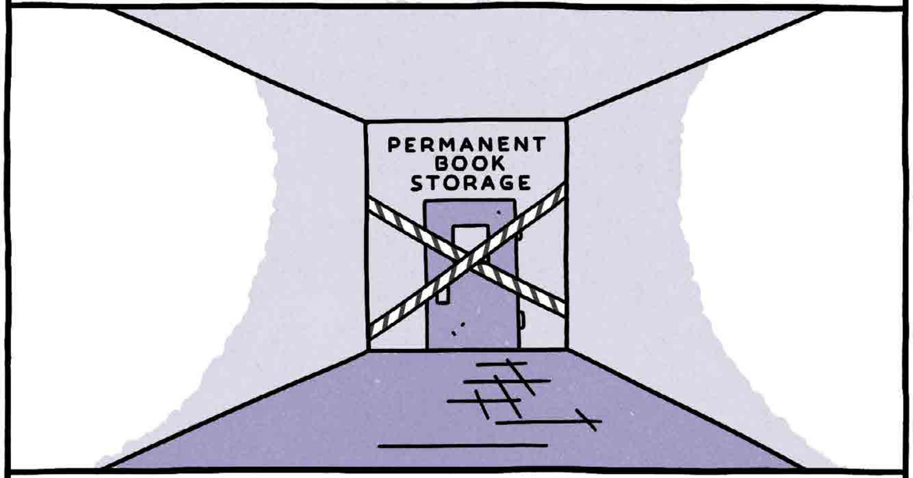

THE BOOK
OF DARKNESS
IS FULL
F DARKNE
GET RID OF EXPLICIT BOOKS
No gay AGENDA in our SCHO
PARENTS' RIGHTS NOW
PAREN
CHOIC
IS
FREED

No one was required to read any of the books that were targeted, but that wasn't enough for the banners to keep their kids from reading the books.

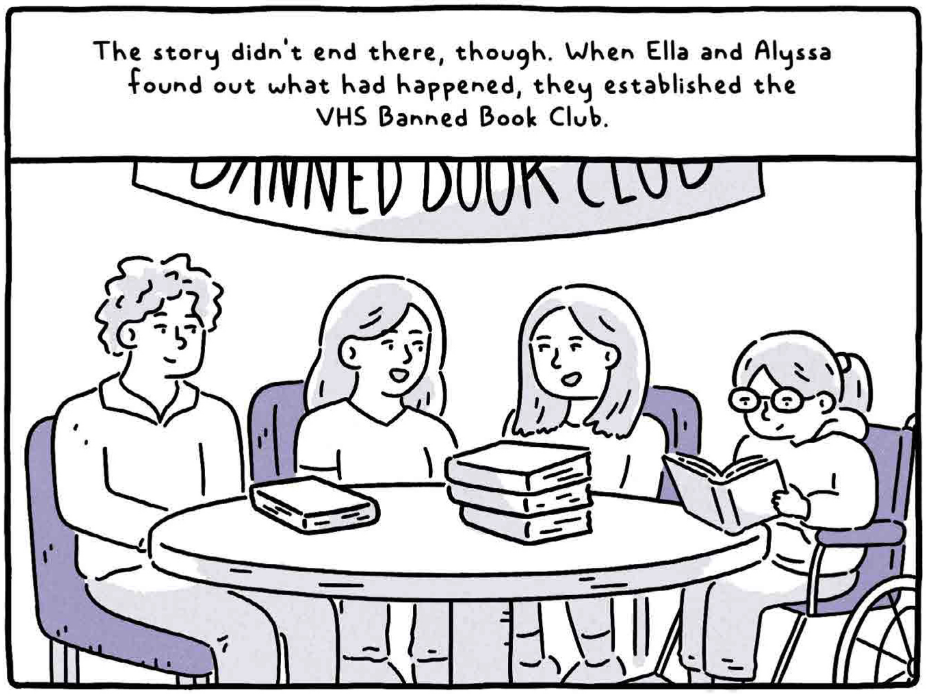


They wanted to keep everyone from reading them.

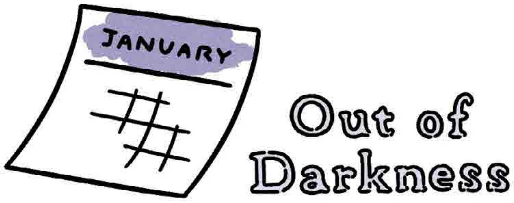
Parents, librarians, teachers, students, and community members fought back, but the school board leadership in Leander ultimately caved to the book banners.

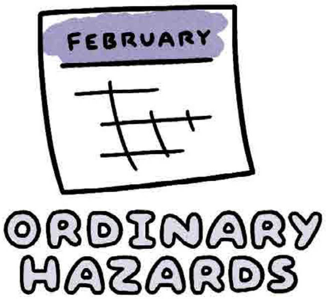


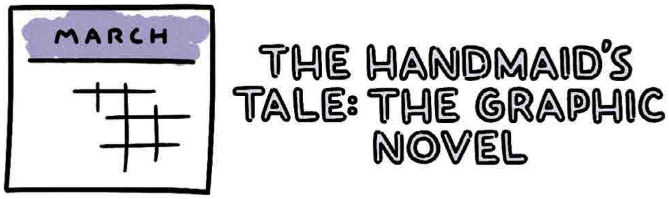
Most of the books were removed.

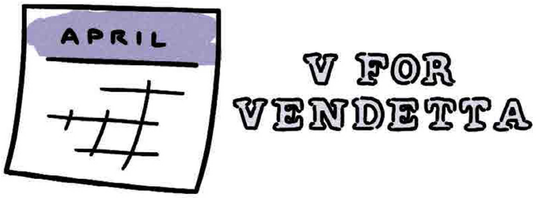

The story didn't end there, though. When Ella and Alyssa found out what had happened, they established the VHS Banned Book Club.
BANNED BOOK CLUB

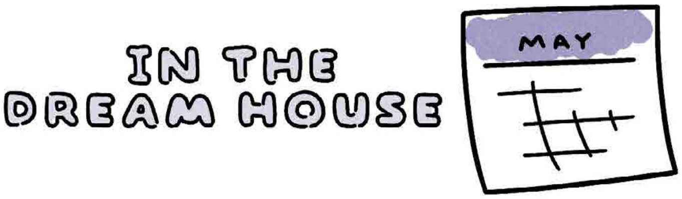
Each month, the club discusses one of the books removed from the curriculum.

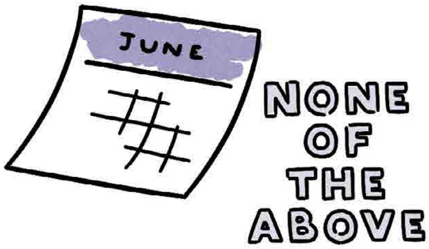

JANUARY
Out of Darkness

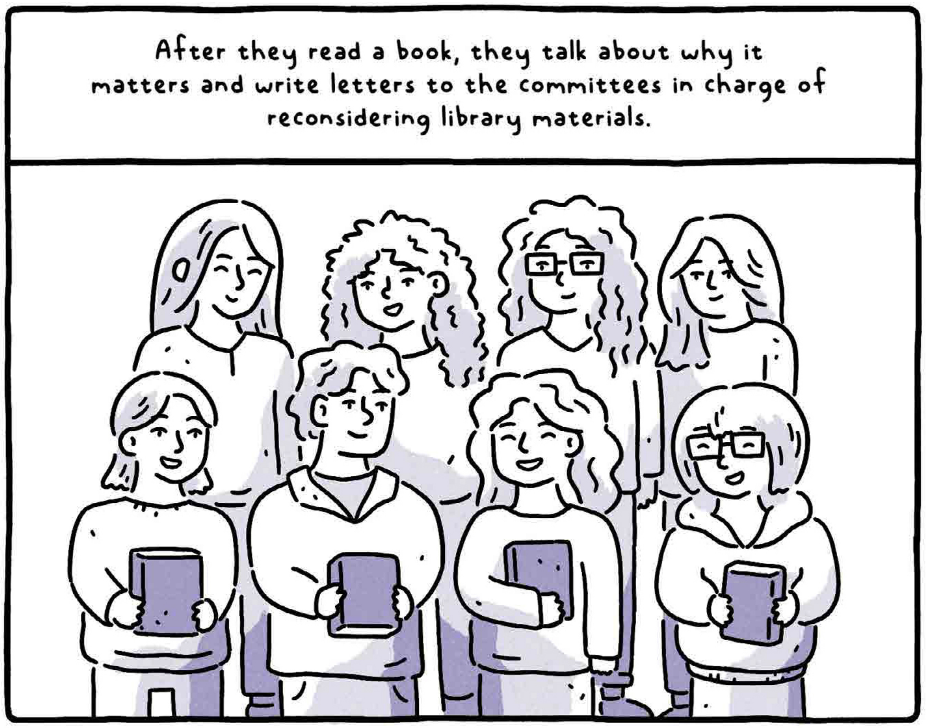

FEBRUARY
ORDINARY HAZARDS


MARCH
THE HANDMAID'S TALE: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

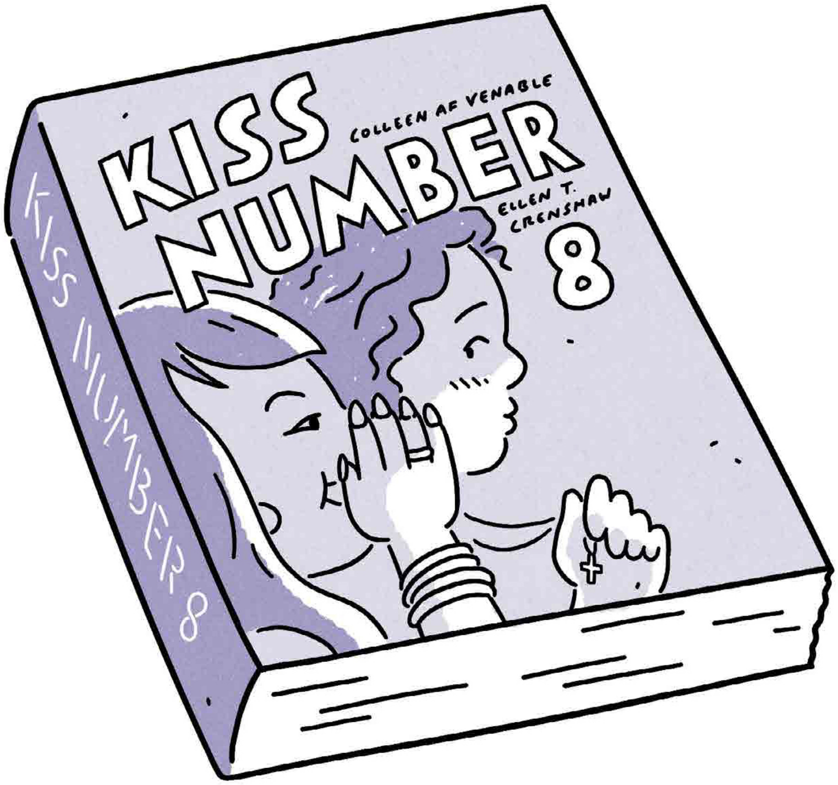

APRIL
V FOR VENDETTA


MAY
IN THE DREAM HOUSE


JUNE
NONE OF THE ABOVE

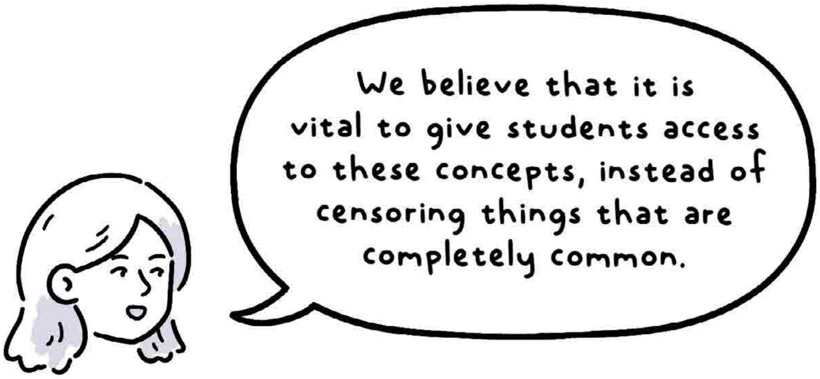

After they read a book, they talk about why it matters and write letters to the committees in charge of reconsidering library materials.

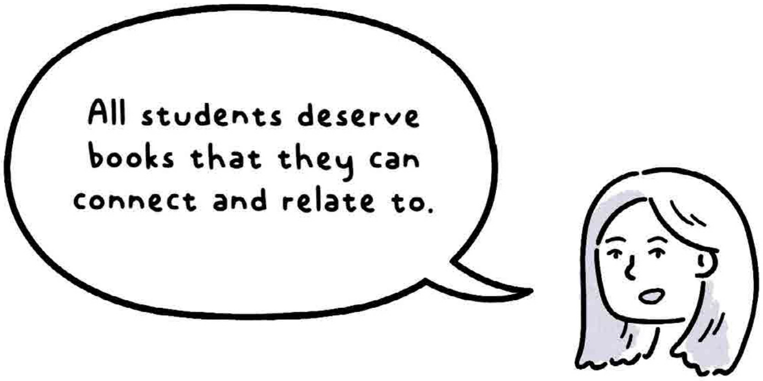
And they're making a difference!

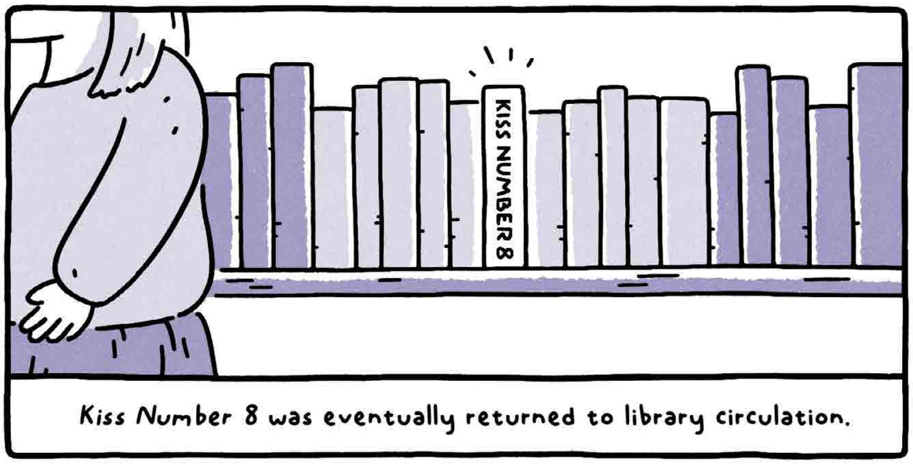

KISS NUMBER 8
COLLEEN AF VENABLE
ELLEN T. CRENSHAW
KISS NUMBER 8

The first book that they read and discussed, *Kiss Number 8* by Colleen AF Venable, was banned for mentioning sex, alcohol use, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

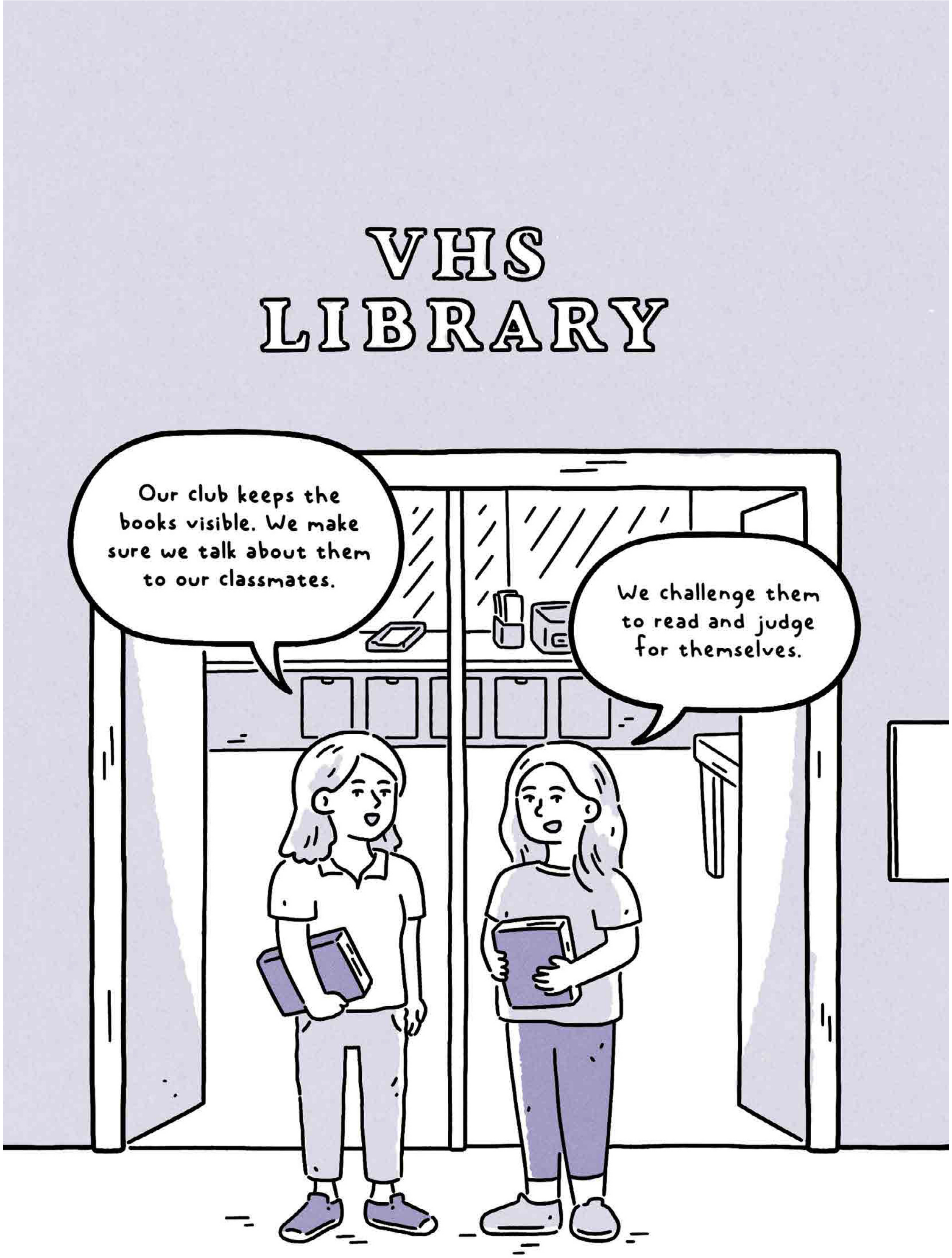
The club pushed back with a strong message:

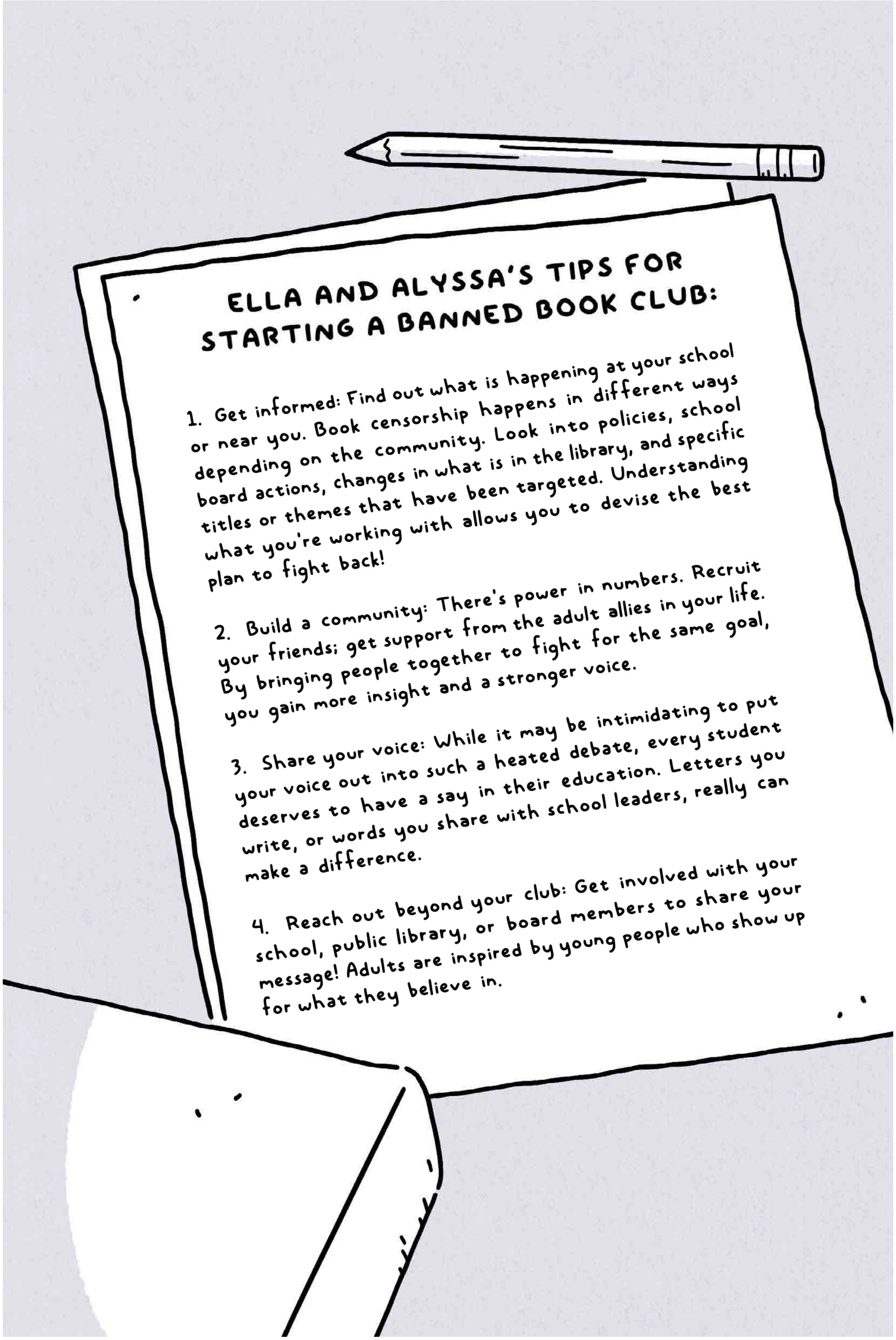

We believe that it is vital to give students access to these concepts, instead of censoring things that are completely common.


All students deserve books that they can connect and relate to.


KISS NUMBER 8

Kiss Number 8 was eventually returned to library circulation.


VHS LIBRARY
Our club keeps the books visible. We make sure we talk about them to our classmates.
We challenge them to read and judge for themselves.



ELLA AND ALYSSA'S TIPS FOR STARTING A BANNED BOOK CLUB:

1. Get informed: Find out what is happening at your school or near you. Book censorship happens in different ways depending on the community. Look into policies, school board actions, changes in what is in the library, and specific titles or themes that have been targeted. Understanding what you're working with allows you to devise the best plan to fight back!

2. Build a community: There's power in numbers. Recruit your friends; get support from the adult allies in your life. By bringing people together to fight for the same goal, you gain more insight and a stronger voice.

3. Share your voice: While it may be intimidating to put your voice out into such a heated debate, every student deserves to have a say in their education. Letters you write, or words you share with school leaders, really can make a difference.

4. Reach out beyond your club: Get involved with your school, public library, or board members to share your message! Adults are inspired by young people who show up for what they believe in.

DEBBIE FONG

Debbie Fong is an Ignatz-nominated comic artist and illustrator. Her debut graphic novel, *Next Stop,* was a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection and received starred reviews from *The Horn Book, Kirkus Reviews,* and *The Bulletin.* Debbie is also the artist behind POMMO Press, an online art shop selling prints, stationery, and other fun goods. She lives in Brooklyn.

ASHLEY HOPE PÉREZ

Ashley Hope Pérez is the author of award-winning novels for young adults, including *Out of Darkness, The Knife and the Butterfly,* and *What Can't Wait. The New York Times Book Review* described *Out of Darkness* as a "layered tale of color lines, love and struggle in an East Texas oil town." It was named a best book of the year by *Kirkus Reviews* and *School Library Journal* and received awards including a Printz Honor and the Tomás Rivera Book Award. Despite being published in 2015 and never challenged until 2021, *Out of Darkness* has become one of the most frequently banned books in the US. Pérez stands with students, educators, and authors in the fight for the right to read.

STATEMENT ON LAND AND RESPONSIBILITY

I edited this book while living and working in Central Ohio, which is the traditional homeland of the Shawnee, Miami, Wyandotte, Delaware/Lenape, and other Indigenous Nations. Despite centuries of genocidal actions and policies by governments and religious organizations, these vibrant and innovative sovereign nations exist. Because of the United States government's disregard for treaties and forced relocation of Indigenous people through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, there are no federally recognized American Indian tribes in the state of Ohio today. But Indigenous people are here, resisting and persisting. I recognize and honor their inherent right to be the principal stewards of this land and its resources. A further responsibility for repair belongs to "land grant" universities like the one where I teach in Ohio. The US government funded these universities through the unjust sale of expropriated Native lands. To acknowledge land and harms is not repair; it only begins to mark the need for justice. US citizens and US institutions have the responsibility to do more than acknowledge. We must act.

Concrete action includes the education we bring to ourselves and others. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) demonstrates how Indigenous storytelling and theorizing speak to core concerns of human experience.[*1] The public scholarship by Dr. Debbie Reese (tribally enrolled at Nambé Owingeh) provides a critical framework for recognizing and contesting the many harmful stereotypes about Native people in literature, and it offers resources to support teaching, reading, and writing toward redress and fuller recognition of Native sovereignty and dignity.[*2] In *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz challenges myths of the United States that have been promulgated as fact and provides access to aspects of history that few of us learn in school.[*3]

We can act on what we learn about the lands where we live, work, and travel. The *High Country News* "land-grab" project documents the land seizures and violence-backed treaties that made Native dispossession the foundation of "land-grant" universities and points to remedies: https://www.landgrabu.org/.[*4] Voluntary land taxes are one way to recognize our access to stolen Indigenous land. Land tax participants pay an amount that goes directly to Native Nations or organizations in the area. The Native Governance Center (https://nativegov.org/) offers guidance on further actions that follow the leadership of Indigenous Nations and communities.

Even the most robust effort at repair cannot restore what has been destroyed and stolen, but this is no excuse for inaction. Contemporary ownership is the dubious legacy of violent removal and genocide of the land's rightful stewards. The harms of the past persist in the present, and it is our responsibility to acknowledge and address them.

SKIP NOTES

[*1] Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

[*2] Debbie Reese, American Indians in Children's Literature, americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/.

[*3] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

[*4] See the searchable "Land-Grab" database for information on how specific universities have benefitted from land the government expropriated from Native peoples. Robert Lee, "Morrill Act of 1862 Indigenous Land Parcels Database," *High Country News,* March 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If there is anything to recommend the grueling experience of having books banned, it is the experience of community and solidarity with amazing people committed to fighting censorship and erasure. I'm deeply grateful for the brave students, librarians, educators, authors, researchers, activists, and advocacy groups working to protect the right to read. When my stamina falters, when I feel my capacity diminished, I'm reinvigorated and reinspired by their creativity and resistance. Together, we remind each other to hold our stand for readers and for a future we want to live in. I wish I could say things are improving, but each day, more stories and resources disappear from libraries and from the lives of young people. I'm so glad that I am not alone in this fight.

The fact that there are so many of us probably means that I have forgotten to thank someone—or several someones. Please forgive me and know how grateful I am for every action others have taken to keep books on shelves and in readers' hands.

First, I want to acknowledge you, reader, and to thank you for reading. Now that you know what is happening to books, please know this too: *we need you in this fight!* We need you to tell others what is happening. We need you to thank librarians and teachers. We need you to share books with the people in your life. We need you to talk about the books that matter to you. We need you to demand positive action from school board members, district leaders, and politicians. We need you to write and share your own stories.

I have dreamed of this anthology for years, and I am beyond grateful to all who made it a reality. Thank you to the contributors to this collection for opening your hearts and minds to readers to share powerful words about an experience we're all sick of. Thank you to Andrew Karre for planting the seed for this anthology, and to Michael Bourret for watering it.

Thank you to my editor, Sally Morgridge. You set a high bar for what it means to collaborate; I'm beyond grateful for your fortitude, insight, and commitment. Thank you to Debbie Fong for the phenomenal cover and illustrations, and to Chelsea Hunter for the striking book design. I love the purple! Thank you to Phoebe Kosman for enthusiastic and creative publicity efforts. And to everyone at Holiday House: it has been such a pleasure to work with you all.

Thank you to writer and researcher Tasslyn Magnussen for tracking and documenting challenges and removals since 2021. You have gathered the undeniable proof of lost opportunities for kids to read, learn, and see themselves in books. I know how discouraging this work is *and* how essential it is to demonstrate the harm and magnitude of this awful chapter in the right-wing playbook. Thank you to Kelly Ray: your incredible behind-the-scenes research has made a tremendous difference. Remember when we used to have to explain to people what Moms for Liberty *was*? Right-wing groups like M4L are known for what they are in part because of your work to expose their narrow-minded, harmful, self-serving book-banning mission.

Thank you to the teachers and librarians who have fought for readers, including Suzette Baker, Summer Boismier, Becky Calzada, Amanda Jones, and many others. Thank you to Jon Friedman and Kasey Meehan for the many opportunities to inspire and be inspired by students. Thank you to youth activists, especially Christopher Lau and the members of the Vandegrift Banned Book Club. Thank you to (extra)ordinary citizens-turned-activists, like Leila Green Little, who has led the legal fight to preserve access to books in Llano, Texas, after a hostile takeover of the community's public library. Thank you to hard-working journalists, especially Mike Hixenbaugh, who have taken up the story of the book bans and their costs.

Thank you to Ellen Oh and We Need Diverse Books for bringing banned authors together and sharing resources on why it is essential to preserve access to diverse books. Thank you to John Chrastka, Peter Bromberg, and everylibrary.org for defending libraries and readers. Thank you to ACLU chapters, the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, teachers' unions, the Mellon Foundation, and the many other organizations supporting the right to read. I'm especially impressed by the quick and bold work of local groups like Annie's Foundation in Iowa. You all show what is possible when communities refuse to accept the subtractive logic of book banners. Thank you to the funding organizations and legal teams mounting lawsuits to get *Out of Darkness* and other books returned to school libraries and to push back against state laws that unconstitutionally restrict access to books.

Course releases and research funds from The Ohio State University supported the completion of this project and enabled broader efforts to educate the public about the rise of censorship. Thank you to the organizers—of conferences, trainings, festivals, book clubs, and other events—who have invited me to talk about book banning and what it means for readers. Speaking to your communities has taken some of the sting out of *not* being invited for school visits since bans of *Out of Darkness* began.

My colleagues, friends, and family have probably heard more about book banning in the last few years than they ever bargained for. Thank you all for your patience, encouragement, and support. Thank you for scooping me up when the hate mail was heavy, when the laws got more oppressive, and when the news was bad. Thank you for celebrating small victories with me. This isn't the work that I would have chosen, but it's the work I've needed to do. I couldn't do it without you.

Special thanks also to Alisa Alering, Shelley Burns, Jessica Delgado, Sarah Derry, Pat Enciso, Maggie Flinn, Amanda Fox, Mary Harris, Judy Parnes, and Johanna Sellman. Thank you to Carl Schock and David Dubose for hosting me on my first book ban trip to Central Texas in 2021, for reading and defending banned books, and for being such engaged godfathers to my sons. Thank you to Justin Ray for inspiring me with conversations about the change we want to see in the world and how we strive to be it. Thank you to my parents, Pat and Terry Ray, for modeling commitment to family and continual learning. Thank you to R. L. and

Martha Whitehead for setting an example of swimming against cultural currents to advocate for others.

Thank you, Charlie Pugsley, for being an incredible partner and a generous reader of my writing (major and minor). Having your eyes on my words makes all the difference. I love how we celebrate and support each other in growing, learning, and playing. Sharing my real life with you is such a joy. Did I mention that you're my favorite bookseller? Thank you—and Bookspace Columbus—for keeping *Out of Darkness* in stock during the double bottleneck of book banning and pandemic printing shortages. Ollie Pugsley, you are a delightful bonus kiddo, and I think it is so cool that you are already an author and illustrator of many books. Bring on the *Titanic* stories (and whatever you come up with next)!

Thank you, thank you, thank you—seriously, and extra much—to my sweet kiddos, Liam Miguel and Ethan Andrés. You wait (mostly) patiently during Zoom meetings and interviews, help me find time to write, and keep me company at conferences (I especially loved sitting in the big chair with you at ALA in Chicago). Thank you for putting up with my bingo to-do lists, "new driver" ways, bad jokes, and reminders. Thank you for hugs that make my life longer and for (almost) never getting tired of playing board games together. Thank you for valuing your access to books. Thank you for the chance to keep learning new ways of caring for each other. I have a lot of jobs, but being your mom is my favorite. I love you so much.

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RESOURCES

HOW TO LEARN ABOUT AND ACCESS TARGETED BOOKS

Books Unbanned (Brooklyn Public Library)

www.bklynlibrary.org/books-unbanned

Here, readers between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one can sign up for a free Teen eCard that gives them access to Brooklyn Public Library's full e-book and audiobook collection, which intentionally includes frequently banned books. The site also has a podcast and accounts of how bans are impacting teen readers.

Comprehensive Banned Books Resources (Penguin Random House)

www.penguinrandomhouse.com/banned-books/

A site full of guides, tailored resources, issue introductions, and spotlights on banned books by theme. Although the site includes a lot of materials for fighting book bans, it focuses more on the value and importance of the books that are being removed.

MORE ON BOOK BANNING AND HOW TO FIGHT IT

Detailed Reports and Analysis of Issues (PEN America)

pen.org/issue/book-bans/

Since 2021, PEN America has researched, documented, and analyzed book bans in regular reports. They include explanations of terminology, trends in censorship, laws affecting access to books, and impacts on writers, illustrators, and readers. The reports also provide a great deal of data and clear documentation that will make it easy for you to find other sources they cite.

Reporting Censorship

Use the following links to report instances of removal and/or restriction of access to books to the three major organizations tracking censorship. Accurate data on book bans helps demonstrate harms. But keep in mind that the most important way you can "report" a book ban is to talk publicly about it—whether at your school board meeting, with friends, on social media, or in your local newspaper. Keep asking questions to explore which ideas and perspectives are being suppressed, and why. Speaking up about what's happening in your community is one of the most valuable tools you have.

(1) American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom
www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report

(2) PEN America
pen.org/issue/book-bans/

(3) National Coalition Against Censorship
ncac.org/report-censorship

Book Censorship Database by Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson (EveryLibrary.org)
www.everylibraryinstitute.org/book_censorship_database_magnusson
This searchable database is the most comprehensive record of instances of attempted and successful removals of books from schools and libraries. It includes past, current, and pending removals and restrictions of books from libraries and schools. For each instance, it provides information on the school district or community, who challenged the book, the reason given,

censorship organizations involved, and status of access to the book. The tracking begins in 2021 and continues to the present.

Unite Against Book Bans Book Résumés (American Library Association)
bookresumes.uniteagainstbookbans.org/
This searchable database provides detailed information about banned books, including each title's significance and educational value. Each book's information sheet includes awards, reviews of the books, and other information that can be used to explain the merits of a book and why it belongs in the library. Psst! This is also a great resource for finding books if you want to start a banned book club or just find your next great read.

STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH ACTIVISTS

Fight for the First (EveryLibrary.org)
www.fightforthefirst.org/
The resources here help activists pull together local actions quickly. They include tools like petitions, group spaces, and event modules, and free coaching and consulting support to help with long-term organizing.

Tools for Activists (National Coalition Against Censorship)
ncac.org/resource/tools-for-activists
This site pulls together guides, comics, and tip sheets from multiple sources with a focus on deepening activism strategically and knowing your rights.

Activist Resources by Students, for Students (Diversify Your Narrative)
www.diversifyournarrative.com/
This student-led organization provides action guides specifically for teens, with materials for a variety of issues and situations as well as templates and tips.